

P. Christensen

Power under Siege

Let me begin by saying that this book is an amazing achievement in terms of scholarship. The archival research alone is a testament to Jeff's skill and endurance, particularly given the nature of the material. Others on the panel are more qualified to speak to the historiography, but I was impressed with the empirical richness of the book, while in one sense I was also surprised by extent to which Leningraders were both able and — what is the right word — desirous or compelled to keep the diaries they did.

As a political scientist, I was particularly interested in the way Jeff talks about power in this book. In his classic book *Power: A Radical View*, Steven Lukes argues that there are three dimensions of power¹. The first is what we might refer to as “visible power”, or what Jeff generally refers to as coercion and dependency. In political science terms, “A has power over B when A can compel B to do something that B otherwise would not do”. The second is concerned with agenda setting — that is, who gets to decide what gets decided. If peoples' desires and/or grievances are not even given a hearing or are simply ignored by those who set agendas, then the use of visible power is not necessary. The third dimension of power has to do with how peoples' preferences, attitudes, or more broadly speaking “worldviews” are shaped in the first place through socialization, acculturation, and one could use Braudel's term, by the “structures of everyday life”. (Jeff refers to these three dimensions of power as “resource power”, “discursive power”, and “narrative power” on p. 29.) One of the most fascinating aspects of Jeff's analysis of the Blockade is how he demonstrates that the dynamics of the

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Blockade called into question, challenged, and in many ways fundamentally altered how power was exercised and manifested on all three dimensions of power. For example, he argues on page 30 that “power in the Blockade lurked not only in institutions, coercion, and resource dependency, but also in close relations of meaning where we might not think to look”. The circumstances of the siege compelled people to “innovate and act”, and to consider behaving in ways that they would never otherwise have even contemplated (see also pp. 30–31).

I continued to think about these questions of power throughout my reading of the book. Who and/or what “had power” or “exercised power” during the Blockade? The institutions of coercion were certainly still there and were operative, but they faced a series of limitations and previously absent challenges due to the dire circumstances of the siege. There are numerous examples in the book of people making statements to the authorities that before the Blockade (and after) would have been deemed “anti-Soviet” which were either ignored or even in some cases accepted as legitimate criticisms.

There were many moments in the book when the narrative seems to suggest that as the Blockade took hold during that first winter, that “narrative power” was increasingly — if not wielded by — then certainly structured by one thing: food. It was here that all three fields of power came together, if you will, as official institutions tried to control production and distribution; as those people involved as either producers or “distributors” of food — either officially or in the “markets” — used their positions in ways that were either self-interested or empathetic, depending on the circumstances; and as everyone had to decide how, when, and if to exercise what Jeff refers to as “tragic agency” when it came to their own survival and that of those closest to them — what are referred to as “anchors” in the text.

There is then a fascinating argument in the chapter on gender that suggests that the Blockade in some important yet also tragic ways — can we use the word — “empowered” women. On the one hand, women increasingly were called into the sphere of production, which had implications for both their material and social status. On the other hand, as women had always carried the primary burden of taking care of the household and procuring food for the family, when the Blockade tightened its grip, that part of “the second shift” became in many ways the most important factor in people’s lives. One of the most interesting parts of this chapter for me was the paradox that arose between women’s changing status as the result of the Blockade, and the re-inscription of traditional understandings of gender roles (pp. 137–138).

At the end of the book, Jeff returns to the question of how we should think about power based on the experience of the Blockade. He argues there that “perhaps not all ‘power’ is institutional domination or control”. This is surely true. He then goes on to state that, “We know power is a potential realized when used — but its use might not be conscious or motivated, and it might act around and through us, and against or with us”. That is, for me, the primary lesson about power that the Blockade brings home. We see in the book how the first dimension of power — coercion and control — continued to work and falter; we also see how the second dimension of power — who decides what gets decided — was fundamentally altered by, in effect, the German army. But most profoundly, the experience of the Blockade

made manifest the reality of the third dimension of power that underlying everything else are those “structures of everyday life” that we either ignore or take for granted, until they are stripped away from us.

So after all of this, I ask Jeff how he would assess the balance between structure and agency, in a world of fields of power that pull in different directions simultaneously.

¹ Lukes S. *Power: A Radical View*, 2nd ed. (London: Red Globe Press, 2005).

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Abstract: This book by Jeffrey K. Hass is an impressive work of scholarship that has uncovered a wealth of material on the Siege of Leningrad during World War II. Through this research, the author has highlighted the power dynamics at play during the siege. He argues that power was visible in the form of coercion and dependency, but also in agenda setting and in the shaping of people’s attitudes and worldviews. The circumstances of the siege forced people to innovate, act, and consider behaviors they would never have otherwise. The book also examines how food became a central factor in the exercise of power, with official institutions trying to control production and distribution, those involved in production and distribution using their positions in self-interested or empathetic ways, and everyone needing to decide how to exercise “tragic agency” when it came to their own survival. The author also argues that, in some paradoxical ways, the blockade empowered women, as they were called into production, while also taking on the burden of procuring food for their families. This book is a fascinating exploration of the various ways power manifested itself during the siege and how individuals and institutions responded to the pressure of such dire circumstances.

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

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