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War, Fields, and Competing Economies of Death. Lessons from the Blockade of Leningrad

Jeffrey K. Hass¹

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ABSTRACT

War can create a massive amount of death while also straining the capacity of states and civilians to cope with disposing of the dead. This paper argues that such moments exacerbate contradictions between three fields and “economies” (logics of interaction and exchange)—a political, market, and moral economy of disposal—in which order and control, commodification and opportunism, and dignity are core logics. Each logic and economy, operating in its own field, provides an interpretation of the dead that emerges from field logics of normal organization, status, and meanings of subjects (as legal entities, partners in negotiation, and subjects with biographies and dignity). Using the case of the Blockade of Leningrad, with its massive amount of civilian death, this essay examines how local authorities followed an expedient logic to maintain order; how state workers charged with disposal followed an instrumental logic of gain; and how civilians tried to maintain a logic of dignity but were forced by desperation to act contingently and instrumentally. The analysis suggests a broader application of field theory beyond organizational communities; how culture in fields operates via entities of valence (anchors); and the need to make emotions and social distance clearer in frameworks of fields, culture, and practice.

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1. Introduction

Studies of fields, power/culture, and subjectivity tend to focus on live bodies. This is reasonable, but incomplete, as humans expend physical, creative, and emotional energy on disposal and commemoration of the dead—which hints at assumptions about subjectivity. We know that how we respond to the dead—bereavement, rituals of passing, altered senses of self—are highly personal but also shaped by social forces. What happens to perceptions and practices of death, when war shocks the social order and practices by unleashing new quantities and qualities of death, and when emotions and norms confront demands for expediency and survival? War is that moment when states and regimes need the disciplined and obedient subject, and how states and civilians respond to wartime death is a key facet of the wartime social order. A regime and state that treat their dead like banal physical matter might think the same about living subjects, and how different actors, from state elites and officials to civilians, code and respond to wartime death (cf. Walter 1999; Holland 2000) can shed light into the construction of social meanings and subjectivities. One case with plenty of wartime death was the Blockade of Leningrad, and the story of death in that event deserves its full hearing. As Axis armies besieged that city for 872 days between September 1941 and January 1944, at least 800,000 civilians died (likely more), most from starvation (Kovalchuk and Sobolev 1965; Cherepenina 2001). In November-December 1941 the bread ration bottomed out at 250 grams daily for workers in military enterprises and 125 grams for everyone else. The quantity and quality of death were traumatic, as corpses lay scattered on streets, in morgues, and apartments, often with body parts missing.¹

That this experience affected meanings of the subject was inevitable—but how? What were practices and cultural dynamics of coping with an enormous amount of death? What happens to cultural practices when institutions as collective recipes supported by power relations are under duress?² What happens when an entity as symbolically charged as a dead body is subject to conflicting practices and frames of different institutions? As one of the most challenging and tragic civilian wartime experiences—a “Soviet Gettysburg” when norms, institutions, and practices were under duress—the Blockade might provide insights into these questions and augment

our understanding of fields and culture. To address these issues, this analysis employs an amended field-theoretic framework. Actors' perceptions of needs and practices depend on positions in fields mediated by *habitus* (knowledge, skills, dispositions). In particular, I focus on "economies" as a subset of field rules of exchange, use, and valuation of entities. In the case of the dead in the desperate first winter of the Blockade (1941-42), meanings of "death" and "disposal" depended on core actors from three fields—state policy-making, labor implementing policies, and civilian families coping with death—acting via three different economies of exchange and use—political economy, market economy, and moral economy. Three tensions arose as these fields and economies intersected. In the first, state officials viewed civilian deaths as potential threats to be disposed of effectively, and they set rules for disposal—but those who carried out disposal had skills to trade labor for gain, even in Soviet socialism. A second was between entrepreneurial workers and kin: the former sought gain that could seem profane for innocent deaths, while the latter sought a dignified burial. A third tension was within civilians forced to calculate like rational actors whether to expend scarce resources (time, energy, food, money) for dignified disposal, but who continued to reflect through lenses of dignity.

Other upshots of this story, some of which I discuss more in the conclusion, are these. First, the influence of fields and economies can (like natural fields) extend beyond relatively bounded institutions. While this might not be surprising, it presents a challenge to field theory in its present form (cf. Fligstein and McAdam 2012), in which fields have structural foundations that, perhaps, are too robust relative to social reality. Second, instrumentally rational action might seem to drive much of what we observe in Leningrad, but I suggest that our agents, especially family members, were *compelled* to act in an instrumentally rational manner because of contexts of resource deficits and dependency. Supposedly rational action is betrayed by reflection and deliberation. The rational actor sometimes is natural, but often enough is compulsory. Third, emotion and social distance might seem banal, but they might be a bedrock for fields.

2 Theorizing War, Death, and the Subject

2.1 *Fields and Economies of Wartime Death*

I begin with the premise that regardless of physical realities involved, “death” is a socially constructed category and boundary, and its meanings are bound to politics of knowledge and control (Palgi and Abramovitch 1984; Walter 2004; Kaufman and Morgan 2005; Rose 2006). How various actors—friends and family, coroners, police, doctors, pastors, bereavement psychologists, and others—treat the dead contributes to meanings that can frame the essence of the individual and its relation to the social body (Sandstrom 2005; Lee 2014). Death certificates, autopsies, and public viewings expand those practicing a “gaze” over the form and boundaries of death. Further, as manifestations of power/knowledge, claims about death imply claims about life (boundaries, healthy lifestyle, etc.). If practices and techniques for coordinating the living shape subjectivities, by extension it seems logical that rules and practices for disposal and commemoration of the dead can contribute to the normal self and subjectivity. Certification by doctors and state officials gives death an ontological and legal dimension and defines whether an individual is “dead.” Tributes constitute part of the late person’s biography and shape narratives of the “good life.” Such attention and rituals imply a non-trivial essence beyond physical bodies; perhaps our treatment of death augments a mind-body (or soul-body) dichotomy that talk of a “subject” possible.

The desperation and deprivation of the Blockade reduced procedures and practices vis-à-vis the dead to a minimal set of distinct core relations and practices: state officials aiming to control disposal of the dead; cemetery workers charged with disposal but also engaging in (not always legal) opportunistic, gain-oriented practices; and kith and kin of the dead, seeking to dispose of friends and family with a modicum of respect and dignity if possible. Why do we see such patterned variation? The usual, and reasonable, initial explanation would be that institutions situate actors and shape their interests and capacities for action by providing and enabling particular forms of capital (labor, credentials, legal authority, etc.). Yet relying on “institutions” or “discourses” to explain variation in perceptions and practices presumes mechanisms and conduits of influence or force in the first place (or reduces institutions to “rules + sanction,” the for-

mula of rational choice) . A different approach is field-theoretical: to analyze actors' perceptions, interests, deliberations on action, and reflections from their positions vis-à-vis other actors and rules of interaction. This is not the place for an encyclopedic discussion of fields, so I focus on three facets relevant to this essay: anchors, economies, and field interaction and intersection. Generally, a field is a context of “organized striving” (Martin 2011: 252-254; 317-320) in which actors orient practices vis-à-vis rules, other actors, and entities imbued with *valence*, i.e. emotional, symbolic, or other investment and meaning. In a field-theoretic approach, we ascertain cognitive “baggage” (*habitus*) actors bring to a context and the nature of rules and logics of interaction that actors signal and “feel” as they navigate relations (Bourdieu 1990, 1998; Martin 2011). Fields need not be restricted to one level of social organization (Mey 1972), and they might be an indirect outcome of institutions.

To employ field concepts, we must trace positions and relations and how they correspond to rules, practices, and interactions. However, not all relations and entities (nodes of relations) are alike. Some particular entities are imbued with significant valence that orients and compels action (Martin 2011: chapter 7). These entities, which I call anchors, are an intersection of social meanings and relations that 1) are a touchstone for judgments (moral, aesthetic, etc.), and 2) resonate with an actor's sense of self.³ Anchors are where social and self intersect: I sense anchors in my environment, and my responses and practices are grounded in part on how I relate to these anchors, and how others relate to them. For our particular subject of inquiry, an important anchor would be the dead, and one core facet of our story will be *differing meanings of and relations and practices vis-à-vis anchors*. The upshot is that we can analyze practices of objects of interests (food, the dead, money, etc.) not simply by referring to “institutions” but by tracing actions through fields of perception and practice.⁴ Note that this problematizes and enriches our understanding of institutions and action: just as an electric field can induce a magnetic field, and vice versa, an institution can induce a social field—but that social field can carry institutional logics outside the domain of that institution through interactions or even maintain its logic in moments when institutional enforcement is strained by exogenous shocks.

2.2 *Civilian Dead as Objects, Commodities, and Subjects*

Because meanings, anchors, and organized strivings can differ across and within fields, I propose using “economies” to designate a particular facet of field practices 1) that inform the relative worth of the anchor in question, and 2) that inform actors as to how to negotiate the exchange of goods and services involved in relating to that anchor (use, handling, exchanging, etc.). This differs from the traditional use of “economy” as institutions of production and exchange. Instead, adopting a meaning closer to that of Michel Foucault (1989) in his study of classifications and knowledge, I use “economy” to designate subsets of field practices pertaining to categories, norms, and relations that structure concrete valuation and exchange. These economies also tend to correlate with particular spaces in which these economies are performed, perhaps physical (real spaces for physical interaction) or virtual (symbolically bounded contexts of interaction, e.g. state agencies). For this study, I apply a threefold structure of fields and economies of making and imposing meaning on the subject: a field of power and its relevant political economy of control; a field of labor and its market economy of opportunistic gain; and a field of the family and its moral economy of dignity. I extrapolate these ideal types from insights in the scholarship on political, moral, and market economies (cf. Hass 2012), and from empirical material here.

2.2.1. Field of power and political economy of control

This field and its economy originate and operate in institutional spaces of political authority and decision-making—in our case, Leningrad authorities of the Soviet state and Communist Party—and subordinate bodies that implement broader decisions taken at the top. (This field and economy is also manifested in physical spaces where social control occurs, e.g. morgues, jails, etc.) The governing logic is some variant of control and creating *obedient subjects* (Foucault, 1977, 2007; Weber 1978), and this was true for the Soviet state and Communist Party, especially under Stalin. While “revisionist” scholarship questioned the effectiveness of Party and state control and revealed how civilians contributed to this collective modernity under the auspices of “Soviet

power,” the point remains that hierarchical control in the tradition of Leninist “democratic centralism” was a key logic for the Soviet project, and policies were often designed either to improve effectiveness of control or to cope with crises and contingencies that threatened control (Hessler 2004)—and political economy in Leningrad was no different (Lomagin 2002). While officials might have been concerned with civilian well-being, civilians were also a resource for Soviet power, and a potential threat if allowed enough autonomy, as they might entertain counter-revolutionary values.

Given this logic of the field of power, we expect a political economy of control to guide state policies regarding Blockade death and disposal. Like civilians, the corpse as anchor would be *formalized and politicized*, in that it is an object subject to formal rules and categorization, and such rules and categories are ultimately related to political procedures and control.⁵ Bureaucratic actors seek to optimize social and political authority and maintain social order through application of law and political capital. It follows that state officials and professionals follow a contingent bureaucratic logic of coding the dead (as they often code citizens) in an impersonal, utilitarian fashion. State authorities, charged with maintaining order and delivering security and victory, face a growing number of dead and challenges to social order, such as possible epidemics or a drop in civilian morale as the number of casualties increases. One solution might be simply dumping corpses unceremoniously but quickly to avoid epidemics and further erosion of morale.

2.2.2 Field of labor and market economy of opportunism

This field originates from institutions and organization of labor and is counter-intuitive for the Soviet case. Market economy is performed in physical and institutional spaces where exchanges are negotiated and carried out; for our concrete case, the physical is more important than the institutional space (more relevant for, say, a financial market). While we might expect a field of labor to embody norms and logics that are collective in essence and value dignity of the individual (e.g. as laborer rather than cog in a machine), by 1941 this collective, dignity-oriented logic had been corroded by Stalinist policies of exploitation and atomization. While propaganda paid

lip service to working class dignity and collective identity, real policies—Stakhanovism, unequal remuneration, attempts to have workers discipline each other (e.g. in communal dwellings or shopfloor meetings), and repression—invoked tendencies towards atomization and resistance at the level of individuals or small networks, e.g. drinking, networks of favors, etc. (Filtzer 1986; Kotkin 1995). The command economy was also grounded in intensive investment (i.e. numbers of workers) and was a deficit economy, and so a shadow economy emerged inside the planned economy (Berliner 1957) in which quasi-market rules of exchange of goods and services were embedded in localized networks. Workers' best options for survival and gain, *in the context of labor*, were moving between jobs and engaging, if possible, in informal work on the side for remuneration in kind. Opportunism became a key practice of survival, gain, and resistance.

Relative to our topic, we expect to observe in the field of labor a market economy of death and disposal, produced by individuals pursuing an instrumentally rational and calculative logic to optimize some gain. The focus is a *commodified subject*, coded in terms of material value and subject to negotiated exchange (Foucault 1989; Zelizer 2005). We presume key actors would pursue an “entrepreneurial” logic of optimizing material gain and coding the dead, as an anchor, as a commodity, with buyer and seller negotiating relative prices (in money or in kind) for various forms of disposal and commemoration and with meaning contained in the “price.” This wartime market economy of disposal is driven by *opportunism*. Market actors act instrumentally for reasons of gain, likely at the expense of others in a weaker bargaining position—and in war, the increasing number of dead might mean expanded or new markets for those with skills or resources to dispose of the dead. The dead body has instrumental meaning: it is matter of no particular significance, except to the extent that its exchange or use can be translated into material gain. Further, in this concrete case, gravediggers had particular physical skills and abilities, as well as institutional position (i.e. assigned to those sites where corpses were interred), that gave them opportunities to translate skills and positions into profit—hence the market logic. (Note that such laborers might agree that the dead are “human”—or recently “human”—but that in the concrete context of this particular exchange, the dead become a commodity.)

2.2.3 Field of kith and kin and moral economy of dignity

This lower-level field emerges from combinations of policies on families (e.g. legal rights and responsibilities) and everyday rules family members negotiate. Generally, moral economies often operate in discursive spaces of claims-making (e.g. letters to editors, protests), where personal proximity encourages empathy.⁶ Physical proximity suggests that the individual is sensed not as some abstraction but as a subject with emotions, feelings, and an essence of “personhood.” Thus, the close social distance is likely to generate feelings and relations of empathy and dignity, especially when suffering is present (Hass 2011).⁷ Such coding of relations and others does not dismiss the possibility of contention, but even then, conflict would be coded in personal terms, vis-à-vis an individual as subject rather than as an abstraction.⁸ The sense of an individual as containing some “person” with some essence worthy of attention (a personality, soul, etc.) becomes central to such a field.

The economy of death and disposal produced by this field and carried by its subjects (usually kin) is oriented to the *dignified subject* shaped by transcendent rules and maxims of symbolic or emotional value. In this economy, we presume actors follow a logic of emotional investment and veneration for the dead as subjects above and beyond monetary and bureaucratic meaning (cf. Smith 2010; Tavory 2011).⁹ A wartime moral economy of disposal faces a potential contradiction: logics of *veneration* and *survival* compete (akin to a bifurcated self, one realized through one’s own body, and through relations to an external other). The living might want to give the dead respect and meaning, but circumstances forbid this: following rituals and meanings becomes costly, as material needs make instrumental calculation inevitable. Civilians then face opportunism from entrepreneurs of disposal and state officials pursuing contingent tactics of disposal, both with minimal veneration. At the same time—and traumatic in the Blockade—starving civilians might find they have to leave the dead in mass graves, else they use up meager strength for their own labor of veneration (e.g. building a coffin) or use up meager resources (e.g. paying someone else in money or food to make a coffin)—thus also succumbing to effects of starvation.

3. Data and Method

My sources are data collected and stored at three archives or published after 1991 by survivors or their families: over 120 diaries and similar recollections from the Blockade; reports by various state bodies (especially the police and the Health Department); and interviews and diaries Soviet author Daniil Granin collected in the late 1970s for his book on the Blockade (Adamovich and Granin 1982). These provide “historical ethnography” deriving social processes from focused cases. Using actors’ narratives and claims and linking them to social relations and positions takes seriously Weber’s call for *verstehen*, to avoid reducing analysis to a purely third-person account (the analyst knows the “truth”) or first-person account (subjects’ explanations are taken at face value) (Martin 2011). Field theory has an affinity with grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Denzin and Lincoln 1994; Tavory and Timmermans 2009)—the “macro” is not taken as given, but rather is a complex of structures and emergent properties, and a case study at the micro level (ethnography) illuminates broader processes of position, perception, and practice. Thus, I employ a historical form of this method to ascertain actors’ motives and practices, while situating these in contexts. I did close reading of material, focusing on logic and language of Leningraders’ reflections and accounts of events. I also used a rudimentary coding scheme for convenience, as a heuristic for inductive analysis. Triangulating between Leningraders’ recollections and data about material and institution contexts from other sources, I used data to extract *habitus*—reflected in presumptions of normality and shocks and tensions they felt in new situations—and position in fields—reflected in what they perceived and sensed in contexts and how deliberated new, non-routine action. In this way I sought both practices and framing, and from there logics of practice and dispositions.

Representativeness remains one caveat—diaries in archives are not a random sample of the Leningrad population. Given this is a study of dynamics of negotiating meaning and practice, representativeness is less a problem, and cases at hand can facilitate extrapolation and hypotheses for social positions not present here. (For sake of space I cite cases that best illustrate or illu-

minate tendencies under discussion.) Another potentially thorny issue is reliability of diary data from the Stalin era: between the NKVD and Party propaganda, most Soviets felt compulsion to “speak Bolshevik” (to use Stalinist categories of discourse). While repression of the 1930s was real, we should resist Cold War assumptions that Terror struck everywhere or that Soviets were dupes or dissenters. In the 1930s and 1940s, Soviets did criticize Party and state because they took seriously the meaning and mission of the socialist project (Kotkin 1995: chapter 5; Davies 1997). It is also not clear how many Soviets were traumatized directly by the Terror; many believed arrests and punishments were legitimate (Thurston 1996: conclusion). In his studies of 1930s diaries, Hellbeck (2006: chapters 1-2) suggests diarists did not always hide “subversive” thoughts but took seriously the Party’s proposal to use diaries for reflection, and they could frame critical and loyal voices as part of this practice. It is also not clear how many Leningraders feared the NKVD might confiscate diaries; and death by starvation was a more realistic threat than a midnight NKVD visit. Finally, state capacity to monitor and punish was stretched; even propagandists and police were starving (TsGAIPD 25/10/330/11, 17—see references for archival acronyms). While Granin conducted his interviews in the late 1970s, interviewees were open about Blockade horrors, and their narratives share much of the structures and details as Blockade-era diaries. Content and narrative logic closely parallel Blockade-era diaries: i.e. they raised issues taboo in the official account (cannibalism, rape, black market speculation, etc.), and they could be openly critical of state and Community Party authorities.

4. The Empirical Story of Fields and Economies of Wartime Death in Leningrad

4.1 Fields and Economies of Control and Labor Intersect: Control, Contingency, Opportunism

Those bodies in fields of power were main decision-making bodies of the state and Communist Party—the Military Council (Voennyi Soviet), the city’s Executive Committee (Ispolkom), second-level city and Party committees—and specialized committees (e.g. the State Health Inspectorate, the police) charged with monitoring various aspects of social practice and maintaining order. Much as in the 1930s (Hessler 2004), responses to contingent challenges in the Blockade

revealed logics and categories behind perceptions and responses in fields of power. For our account, three challenges were crucial, and state responses revealed the social control logic of the field of power and its political economy: avoiding epidemics to reduce public health risks that would hurt the war effort; maintaining minimal health standards for workers charged with disposing of the dead, to make sure work was completed workers were not at risk (which could hamper the disposal effort and public safety); and enforcing sufficient labor professionalism so as not to offend the civilians and thus avoid risks to regime legitimacy. State policies then defined general tasks and deployed resources (land, labor, food or wages) so as to bring the logic of political economy to life. At the same time, this political economy shaped opportunities for other economies, including quasi-autonomous, quasi-market action (gain-oriented) for laborers: by creating mass burial and thus directing one option for disposal, and by situating cemetery workers in a position to augment state-supplied rations by acting opportunistically—possible in part because the state, strained by war, could only monitor sporadically and could not (or at least did not) use sufficient coercion to alter cemetery workers' opportunistic tactics. Once the massive number of dead were channeled to mass burial, the market economy of disposal could arise to compete with the political and moral economies of disposal.

As in pre-war times, the state's basic task was recording death, through a police officer at the scene and later at ZAGS (*Otdel zapisei aktov grazhdanskogo sostoianiia*, the state body for registering births, marriages, and deaths). Before December 1941, civilians could manage work of digging graves or arranging services with appropriate authorities. By December, the rising death toll was overwhelming both civilians and the state. ZAGS was flooded with requests for death certificates; by January 1942 its officials were recording over 2000 deaths a day, likely an undercount (Cherepenina 2001). Burial Trust (*Pokhoronnoe Delo*), a cooperative organization created in the 1920s to aid Soviet citizens with disposal and commemoration and charged with disposing of corpses in the Blockade, was also overwhelmed, as there were too few coffins and too little labor. In December 1941, the State Health Inspectorate corroborated this claim: too many corpses were piling up too fast because of lack of disposal space and labor (TsGA

7384/17/234/5). One Burial Trust engineer and mechanic eventually recommended using mass graves (*bratskie mogily*, “fraternal graves”), and Ispolkom chairman Pëtr Popkov decreed their immediate use (TsGA 7384/17/282/17). Contingency dictated mass graves would be set up in a haphazard manner. Smaller plots at factories were used at first, but it quickly became clear that larger sites were needed. Cemetery land could be utilized, and some cemeteries (Serafimovskoe, Bogoslovskoe) would become the final resting place for many thousands of Blockade victims. But decreeing mass burials on an industrial scale did not translate easily into implementation. The winter of 1941-42 was unusually cold, the ground was frozen solid, and men assigned to dig the trenches did not always have the strength to work (TsGA 7384/17/234/9, 14). Excavators were employed at larger sites (e.g. Piskarevskoe) although finding excavator operators could be difficult—this group was decimated by Blockade hunger—and gasoline was likely to go to the army (TsGA 7384/3/58/7-9, 23). Thus, disposal went slowly, which members of the Extraordinary Anti-Epidemic Committee noted with growing concern (TsGA 7384/36/81/30-31). Interestingly, their concern said little about *sources* of the problem—and in this framing we see the political economy of Blockade disposal at work.

A brief examination of constructing mass graves at Decembrists Island Fraternal Cemetery should provide a brief glimpse into this process. In December 1941 city authorities set aside five hectares on the right bank of the Smolenka River, on Decembrists’ Island. According to A. P. Nikulin, the Party official charged with running the site, creating mass graves required extra food rations for his team to maintain a work schedule (TsGAIPD 4000/11/83 [notebook #2]/35, 41). One of Nikulin’s main challenges was ensuring his workers had a daily meal of soup, kasha, and 50 grams of goulash (TsGAIPD 4000/11/83 [notebook #3]/11). Obtaining these rations was never easy, and he had to fight his cafeteria manager about feeding not only cemetery workers but also himself (TsGAIPD 4000/11/83 [notebook #3]/40). Such labor was important not only because it would reduce the risk of an epidemic; his workers were also paying “their last debt” to the dead (TsGAIPD 4000/11/83 [notebook #3]/39). While he was a Party member and thus in a lower rank within an institution in the field of power, his everyday work was in the field of labor;

he identified with the Party but observed labor efforts. He framed the task of disposal (mass burial) through this lens, and so the proximal practices and interests of laborers—not only what they were doing, but how they perceived what they were doing and its place in the wider social order at war—shaped Nikulin’s evaluation of the primary tasks, challenges, and solutions of mass disposal. Further, those bodies were not these workers’ close loved ones, but they were somewhat more than labor for Soviet power or a threat to public health.

Officials further inside the field of power and not present at this site did not take into account the challenges of performing such hard work while hungry and cold. Rather, health inspectors and police perceived such sites through a lens of the political economy of the field of power: they actively sought possible threats to order.¹⁰ Inspection reports never mentioned ration levels and hunger. One report about Nikulin’s site claimed that work was badly organized, with corpses lying uncovered in trenches or scattered randomly in the burial area, and no one at the makeshift morgue to receive corpses. Such bad work was not only unprofessional; it risked civilians’ “admiration and indignation,” revealing a concern not for dignity but for social unrest (TsGA 7384/4/67/17). This chaotic state of mass burial threatened both facets of social control, i.e. epidemics and engaged civilians. (In the end, the authorities closed this site because the water table was too high for proper burial [TsGA 7384/17/234/6].) Health Department inspections and police investigations of other sites suggested disorder was rampant. Health Department inspectors criticized sloppy storage and handling of corpses. Bodies were not buried deeply enough, the number of unburied corpses was growing, and procedures for arranging and disposing bodies was routinely violated—for example, burial workers seldom put enough dirt on top of trenches or between layers of bodies, or they left bodies in trenches filled with water. Further, burial workers did not have proper clothing, soap, and other necessary disinfectants as per formal health regulations (TsGA 7384/17/234/7, 11-17; 7384/17/234/18). Initial complaints in February 1942 were not addressed, and a backlog of the dead was building up—over 2000 corpses at some places—leading authorities to use a brick factory to burn the dead, although cremation made less of a contribution than hoped (TsGA 7384/17/234/20-24). NKVD investigations echoed Health

Department reports: uncovered bodies were strewn hither-thither at various sites, and Burial Trust needed to pick up the pace (TsGA 7384/4/ 67/2). Police chief E. Grushko also noted disarray at various cemeteries—bodies not stored properly, and body parts such as heads and limbs strewn about—and he recommended prosecuting the head of Burial Trust (TsGA 7384/4/67/17). Eventually some officials did note that how much earth Burial Trust had dug up to bury hundreds of thousands of Blockade victims (TsGA 7384/3/58/175-176).

Not only were difficulties of labor and space hindering bureaucratically-defined disposal procedures: police investigations and civilians' accounts revealed *opportunism* at work. One recurring issue was that some Burial Trust workers used their labor and position disposing of the dead for personal gain. In January 1942, the authorities prohibited cemetery workers from taking corpses out of coffins (TsGA 7384/17/234/10). In April, the NKVD discovered how an official at the Primorskii morgue documented 220 corpses dispatched for mass burial—but only 107 corpses were in the truck (TsGA 7384/3/58/122). For mass burial, as for industrial production, employees cooked the books to appear to exceed labor quotas to meet plan targets or earn bonuses. An investigation into Burial Trust discovered that officials demanded bribes from families (in money or kind, in one instance cows) for taking care of their dead, even though this was their job (TsGA 7384/4/78/110-113). Civilians also remarked about such practices. Remembering how she coped with her mother's death, one Mariia Fëdorovna (Masha) noted how she saved some ration coupons to obtain a loaf of bread that she could trade for burial labor, and her uncle made a coffin for her mother. Masha agreed to bury her neighbor's two-year-old daughter with her mother, and as they took both corpses on a sled to the cemetery, they passed a line at a bread store; one person in line remarked, "the wealthy, they are burying someone in coffins." At the cemetery they were approached by a man (*muzhik*, a tough-looking working-class male), who asked, "In an individual [grave]? You know the price?" (Shestinskii 1989: 157-159).

4.2 Conflicted Citizens: A Moral Economy of Dignity Meets Opportunism and Desperation

To average Leningraders, the number of dead was too familiar a sight; most Blockade diaries make some reference not only to disposing of the dead physically, but also to retaining some meaning and dignity, both for the dead and for themselves as they related to the dead. That is, dignity was under assault from the Germans, the state, cemetery workers, and even themselves. Death was not at a distance—*everyone* faced both loss and what to do with the dead, especially as the state could not cope adequately and left Leningraders to do much of the work. Civilians had to dispose of dead people who were not only material objects but also identities, personalities, and objects of affection and respect. The dilemma of the “Leningrad death” was twofold: death became a familiar part of the landscape, such that it ceased to shock, even if the death of someone close could still evoke strong emotions; and contingency and desperation demanded low-cost and effective disposal, which implied a sterile disposal bereft of sacred rites and meanings. Starving Leningraders did not always have reserves of strength to make and transport coffins to cemeteries and then dig individual graves. And Leningraders were running out of reserves of money, food, and valuables that they could trade to others for doing the work of making and transporting coffins. The general picture over time was as follows: families dragging a coffin on a sled to a cemetery for disposal and commemoration; then one or two individuals (perhaps hired help rather than families) dragging sleds with corpses, wrapped in linen, to morgues or sites of mass graves; finally, corpses left on streets or in apartment courtyards.

By December 1941 Leningraders made the effort to write about the parade of corpses on sleds as people transported the dead to cemeteries and morgues, and corpses littered along streets, apartment courtyards, and ramshackle collection points. Leningraders became numb to the dead on streets, and eventually to the weak and dying as well—conventional wisdom was that helping someone required extra energy one did not have, and if one also fell down helping another Leningrad, one might not be able to get back up, and would also die. Historian Sergei Yarov (2008; 2011: 68-71) suggests such treatment of the dead was part of broader moral degradation induced by starvation and horrible challenges to survival. To Irina Zelenskaia, this general

indifference was symptomatic of how survival bred dehumanization: people focused solely on themselves and became indifferent to others, and so Leningraders were unmoved and ambivalent about seeing death up close on the streets (TsGAIPD 4000/11/35/79).

Yet corpses on the street, and the dead generally, were not an everyday annoyance; they were symbolic of the average Leningrader, powerless and at risk of degradation by Germans or desperate or opportunistic Leningraders who *could not* care due to circumstances. The parade of the dead did not entirely numb civilians to dignity: they viewed corpses as a manifestation of the traumatic Blockade landscape and its malicious abnormality. Nina Kobzyeva reflected on the seemingly public display of ambivalence, as she witnessed members of the Leningrad “public” walking by one starving person on the street freezing and crying for help: “But how could we help? We ourselves are barely able to stand on our feet and did not have strength to drag ourselves” (GMMOBL Akt 76-07, vol. 1, l. 64). As Elena Averianova-Fedorova wrote, “People die, and they are thrown away on roads, in courtyards, on streets—they are not buried: either there is no one [to dispose of them properly] or no one has the strength to take them away...and so they throw [the dead] right out on the streets...How horribly this is done!” (TsGALI 107/3/330/21). Another Leningrad wrote, “I will remember that picture all my life” (GMMOBL 1p/30/84)—the dead on the streets, frozen corpses naked (robbed of personal property) or missing flesh (robbed of the most personal of property, the physical facet of a “person”). Reflecting on how many of corpses were strewn on the streets or dragged on sleds and wrapped in linen, Nina Kobzyeva wrote, “What a horror—a dead person without a coffin” (GMMOBL Akt 76-07, vol. 1, l. 61). Aleksandr Kedrov related how one radio employee “buried” his father, i.e. “he simply placed [him] between other corpses lying around at that so-called cemetery.”

This suggests that the experience of mass death did not degrade morality. The human dignity in civilians’ moral economy persisted by its juxtaposition to abnormal mass death and disposal, as Leningraders’ reflections reveal. A seemingly numb or instrumentally rational actor was not so numb or instrumentally rational. Walking around corpses was, like the inability to forget these scenes, a sense of one’s own powerlessness and lack of agency—that was the real

dehumanization. This powerlessness and challenge to moral economy of the dignified body was further augmented by the problem of disposal. A dearth of resources forced Leningraders to use expedient disposal that denied the qualities of the body as a human being with inherent dignity. To this extent contingent disposal of transporting corpses in open trucks and depositing them in collectively identified but individually anonymous mass graves was regrettable but understandable to most Leningraders, who lacked the strength and means to carry out “proper” rituals of disposal and parting. In early January 1942 Elena Averianova-Fedorova wrote in her diary how she, her mother, her aunt Tanya, and her half-sister Shura were taking her grandmother to the cemetery for disposal. (Most likely they had no apparent intention of burying her, for Leningraders who did bury loved ones themselves usually noted details in diaries and recollections.) They were struck by the “chain” of corpses without coffins that they encountered. Yet at least these dead were being taken by their own relatives, on sleds: a personal form of final farewell. Worse was transportation of corpses in trucks—anonously, impersonally, as cold objects. “It would be good,” she wrote, “if [these corpses] were taken away by their own relatives, but worst of all is when entire trucks take them away, [corpses] taken away like firewood—undressed, shoeless, however and in whatever... a person walks along, falls, dies—and goes immediately into a truck.” It only added to the profanity that these masses of corpses were being buried in mass graves, “without headstones”—the last insult to the individual subject (TsGALI 107/3/330/17).

As Leningraders became increasingly hungry and weak, and the number dead continued to increase, some Leningraders decided to act entrepreneurially. For payment in bread or other forms of food, some Leningraders would take the cloth-bound corpse on a sled to the nearest morgue. Vera Kostrovskaja noted an informal ad for transporting corpses: as this person was already dragging away one corpse on a sled to the cemetery, he could take another body for 300 grams of bread (TsGALI 157/1/28/20). Mariia Fëdorova noted that the informal price one paid for having loved ones taken away and buried in the winter of 1941-1942 was one kilogram of bread (worth 400 rubles), one liter of vodka, and an additional 800-900 rubles (an enormous sum of money). One of her acquaintances actually got into the business of informal corpse removal.

He charged 100 rubles per corpse and paid 500 rubles as a bribe to dispose of his load, so that if he collected 15 corpses (1500 rubles), he would make a profit of 1000 rubles for one day's work (TsGALI 107/3/321/10, 12). While Fëdorova took the time to write this in her diary, signifying the magnitude of such Blockade practices, she did not leave normative comments—less a judgment of individuals than resignation vis-à-vis an overpowering context that bred such a business.

Yet some Leningraders were driven by such strong inclinations to veneration that he or she refrained from instrumental disposal. To Irina Zelenskaia—who used “Leningrad death” to differentiate civilian wartime death from the soldier's death (TsGAIPD 4000/11/35/93)—proper burial remained sacred despite physical challenges, and she went out of her way to maintain some sacred rites. When “Uncle Petya” died and it was clear the authorities would do nothing, and she and son-in-law Boris decided to act. Boris built a coffin even though he was weak. Zelenskaia used her car—one of the few occasions she did so—to take Petya's body to the cemetery, where they dug him his own grave (TsGAIPD 4000/11/35/45, 48). A few months later her friend Mina died from starvation, and again Zelenskaia forewent the burial bureaucracy. She and friends created a makeshift coffin, took the body in her car, quietly parked in an alley near a cemetery, and dug a shallow grave. Zelenskaia noted there was no real farewell, but this was the best they could do. She brought a kilogram of bread for a bribe, but they met no one who might oppose them. As she noted, “Only a few Leningraders this winter were provided with this kind of funeral” (TsGAIPD 4000/11/35/83). Mariia Fëdorova recorded the December 1941 death and burial of a colleague named Leshchinskii, a Civil War veteran and loyal Soviet. Fëdorova helped make a simple coffin, and two other teachers helped load and drag the corpse on a sled. They arrived at a cemetery on Decembrists' Island—before the Revolution called Golodai Island, which is close to *golodat'*, “to starve,” so that Fëdorova wrote, “What a coincidence. People dying a death from starvation, buried on ‘Starve’ island!” The group arrived too weak to dig a grave, and Fëdorova asked one man working there for help. He dragged the coffin carelessly across the ground, looking for a trench into which to throw it—a “lack of ceremony,” as the man stepped with dirty boots on the chest of one exposed corpse (TsGALI 107/3/321/27-29).

Sofiia Buriakova's recollections (TsGA 9631/1/9/27-45) illustrate another force that were generally weak in blockaded Leningrad, but could be significant when it appeared: religiosity. Buriakova's brother died early in the winter of 1941-1942, and she prepared a Christian burial: gathering dirt, constructing a cross, preparing necessary prayers, and so on. However, she could not get into her brother's room, where he had died and lie in the cold—neighbors had locked the door and were not around to unlock it—and one day she returned home to find the women had opened the room for state employees collecting the dead. She had no news of where he was buried, and this shaped how she dealt with the next close death, when her father died in March 1942. He had asked not to be buried in a mass grave, but Sofiia had little choice, and she and her husband took her father's corpse on a sled to the Serafimovskoe cemetery for burial in a mass grave. There one worker warned her to take him out of the coffin she had made and wrap him in linen instead, as other workers would dump out his body and sell the coffin. She paid him to place her father's body at one specific end of the mass grave so that she would know where to pray for him properly in the future. When her husband died in May 1942, Buriakova went to greater lengths for a proper burial. Unable to find an affordable coffin, she made one herself, arranged a special service at Preobrazhenskii Cathedral, and decided to give him an individual grave. The director of a nearby food store ordered his driver to take Buriakova and her husband's body to Okhtinskoe cemetery. A lone worker, waiting for "clients" who failed to show, offered to dig her husband's grave for bread and vodka. Religious propriety shaped Buriakova's decisions and shaped a trend: not giving her brother and father proper burials compelled her to give her husband his own grave, despite costs.

Buriakova's narrative is one of the few that contradicts the story of expediency for survival, as religious feeling figures prominently. This might make it seem rational action is the state of nature. Yet many Leningraders desired to fulfill meanings and rituals of farewell; to survive and attain some modicum of a dignified burial, they were *compelled* by circumstances to calculate as *homo economicus*. Yet Leningraders' own deliberations and attempts or hopes of

realizing dignified disposal, and Buriakova's religion-fueled success in doing so, suggests otherwise: *homo economicus* might truly be a cultural creation and creature of compulsion.

5. Conclusion : War, Death, and Fields of Culture

I began with the proposition that war problematizes meanings and rituals of death by altering its quantity and quality and disposal tactics. War, like other major shocks (revolution, famine, etc.), sheers away or dethrones niceties that accrete with modernity—various institutions, services, and a window for reflexive deliberation—to lay bare social forces fundamental to practice, structure, and interaction. We have seen how three fields and economies at the core of social organization—order (the state), labor, family—shaped how Leningraders coped with a moment of emotional significance. War's challenges, threats, and deprivations can induce opposing fundamental responses that correspond to poles of the Prisoners' Dilemma: a centripetal force of collective action (rallying around the flag) spurred by shared interests, experiences, identities and danger; and a centrifugal force of defection or opportunism (saving one's skin) driven by individual survival. This account of death has revealed both dynamics—but they emerge from and operate contingently less via broad “institutions” than proximal rules, practices, and positions of fields and economies of social relations. Cemetery workers acted opportunistically for complementary reasons: having the right skills in the right place; desperate need for food; and opportunistic habits bred earlier by the command economy. State elites and officials focused on order, as their interests depended on governance, and many believed in what they were doing (see minutes of Military Council meetings, e.g. TsGAIPD 25/2/3778, 3833, 4484). For kith and kin, the dead were not just corpses; they were once-living individuals with emotional valence who occupied a position in experiences, networks, and emotional landscape (fields) of kith and kin, acting as anchors for practices and meanings. That the dead and kith and kin could share the quality of valence and anchor created a tension between saving the living (thus economizing on disposal) and dignifying the dead. Impulses to individualistic or collective practices were mediated by field logics; if these included religion, then the tension might be resolved one way, and not the other.¹¹

One question for further study is whether and how these economies and fields intersect elsewhere. Let us briefly consider the American Civil War,¹² with its quantities and qualities of death. We see similar contradictions between our three fields and economies, but with different resolutions of tensions. Respect for dead soldiers was respect for selfhood; letting a body rot on the battlefield or burying soldiers without coffins was treating them as animals, and bringing a body back was an attempt to find closure and maintain dignity (Faust 2008: 73, 77). Entrepreneurial solutions to disposal emerged, such as packing bodies in dry ice and transporting them in ready-made coffins. A state that respected market relations allowed such strategies, and those with money could use them. For others, entrepreneurial profit from war death smacked offensively of speculation (Faust 2008: 95-98). Yet religious belief, as norms infused in everyday practices, could also mediate tensions of these fields and economies: market tactics, speculative as they might be, facilitated dignified burial demanded by religious belief. Further, democratic politics—which dictated the state appear, if not be, responsive to public concerns—facilitated other innovations, such as national cemeteries that bestowed dignity to bodies buried where they fell and the ground where they fought and died (Wills 1992; Faust 2008: 232-249). In sum, tensions between our three economies and fields still emerged; but religion and market relations (pre-corporate capitalism) tempered how these core processes interacted. Christianity (especially Protestantism), markets, and democracy were not perfectly aligned in the United States, but there was enough “fit” at the level of everyday practices to facilitate some solutions to tensions between these fields and economies. In Leningrad fields, the lack of religious and democratic practices (not just ideology or “institutions”) meant one less meaning to mediate contradictions. Tensions were resolved when one field or economy “won”—paradoxically, the field of labor and its quasi-market economy, mostly because civilians had no real recourse and state officials did not have the capacity to fully repress market tactics. The fusion of polity and economy generated contradictions in the USSR; their separation in the USA was bridged by religion and democracy. Studying core fields and economies help us appreciate ideologies and practices: polity and religion matter not entirely as façades, discourses, distant rules, or pure independent variables.

Another thought concerns a possible dynamic that is fairly straightforward but perhaps needs more attention: social distance and emotions. If fields involve concrete social relations, their distance and geometry might inform how other actors, entities, and practices within fields are valued and judged—a field might have a “topography.” Whether norms were transgressed in the Blockade depended in part on social or symbolic distance between the actor and another who might suffer (e.g. victims of food theft, or an animal eaten) in a context or field (Hass 2011). Social distance between actors and fields, and perceptions of and tactics towards the dead, seem correlated: kith and kin closest, by field position and personal proximity most emotionally invested; cemetery workers in more distant fields, but seeing the dead up close, *aware* of their meaning for possible utilitarian tactics; and state officials, most distant vis-à-vis field position and personal investment, perceiving the dead coldly and bureaucratically. Logics of fields and positions, and ordered relations between fields, structure interactions with entities (social distance) and shape how actors perceive entities and sense valences (categories and “rationality”). This can affect the “feel” for these entities (emotion and empathy). Culture, structure, and emotion are vertices of a social triangle, each point neither reducible to nor independent of others. Most theories of culture attend to culture-structure (or culture-institutions) links, but emotions—or “sensations” as something preconscious and habitual—need better incorporation into theory.

Bringing together death, distance, and empathy points to yet another important topic that was at the heart of the Blockade story and perhaps at the heart of the human condition, at least in its lived form: *suffering and theodicy* deserve far more attention than they have received in social science. In his study of religions, Max Weber (1922: 116-117) entertained the idea that explaining suffering—accounting for its roots and function—was one driving force behind the creation of meaning and cosmologies. Through meaning we try to find sense and something of worth amidst pain and suffering, something to anchor pain’s uncertainty and potentially destructive force. Perhaps the story of death in the Blockade is one place to begin this inquiry: this was an event that Yarov (2011: 596) characterized as governed most of all by “pain—from the beginning to the end, pain in diaries and letters, pain of the dying and those trying to save them, pain

yesterday and today—everywhere, pain.” How Leningraders in various fields and positions made sense not only of death, but also of suffering, might add to our understanding both of culture and of the human condition that spawns it.

NOTES

¹ Soviet-era narratives (e.g. Pavlov 1985) and contemporary accounts say little about death except the massive death toll and how people died.

² As Graham (1930: vii) wrote in his study of German inflation, “In the study of social phenomena, disorder is...the sole substitute for the controlled experiments of the natural sciences.” Shocks take the place of social laboratories to help us explore fundamental social forces.

³ This argument has affinity with attachment theory (Mikulincer, Shaver, and Pereg 2003) and Collins’ (2005) analysis of emotions. Also, Cerulo (2006) suggests that our brains organize knowledge vis-à-vis “ideal types” from experience and culture; cognitively and culturally we “anchor” perceptions and responses.

⁴ These practices—sets of which I dub “economies”—are practical manifestations of logics of institutions of polity, economy, and society (cf. Friedland and Alford 1991).

⁵ For example, Soviet experiments with disposal involved expanded use of cremation and replacing religious with secular socialist symbols (Merridale 2000).

⁶ I extract this from work on moral economies of peasants and workers, who worked and lived in close proximity and came to share interests and identities (cf. Scott 1976; Thompson 1971).

⁷ We see this in parental grief after a child’s death (Keefe-Cooperman 2004-05).

⁸ I use cases where family interactions were empathetic. We might hypothesize that enmity could provoke undignified disposal, e.g. leaving the dead to rot on the street out of spite.

⁹ Soviet socialism was *formally* grounded in human dignity. While Stalinist realities betrayed this ideal, this promise still grounded sacrifices in the name of “Soviet power” (cf. Kotkin 1995).

¹⁰ This was especially true in the USSR: constant vigilance for “threats” to Soviet power was rooted not only in Stalin’s policies, but also in Bolshevism’s pre-Revolutionary roots in the underground. Lomagin (2002) explored this logic of threat in Blockade politics.

¹¹ A similar dynamic appears vis-à-vis food. Distant decision-makers viewed food as a resource for controlling civilians and maintaining labor. Those implementing policy (e.g. distribution) were close enough to see food's value to hungry civilians and faced temptations to steal and re-sell it in the black market. Starving civilians saw food as a material resource (survival) also imbued with symbolic power and a non-material sanctity.

¹² Deprivation and suffering in the South makes for interesting comparisons generally, e.g. war and gendered identities and practices (a topic I explore elsewhere).

References

Materials from St. Petersburg archives are organized hierarchically: fond (f., collection), opis (op., register), delo (d., file), list (l., page). I use {ARCHIVE fond/opis/delo/list}, with fond absent in GMMOBL. TsGAIPD and TsGA should include “SPb” (“St. Petersburg”), but for sake of space I leave it out. Materials not yet archived use the label “Akt.” I use these abbreviations:

GMMOBL: State Memorial Museum of the Blockade of Leningrad.

TsGA: Central State Archive, state archive.

TsGAIPD: Central State Archive of Historical-Political Documents.

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