

РОССИЯ В ВОЙНАХ И РЕВОЛЮЦИЯХ XX ВЕКА

Война, политика большевиков и страдания советского народа на примере блокады Ленинграда. Дискуссия о книге: Hass J. K. *Wartime Suffering and Survival: The Human Condition under Siege in the Blockade of Leningrad. 1941–1944* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021)

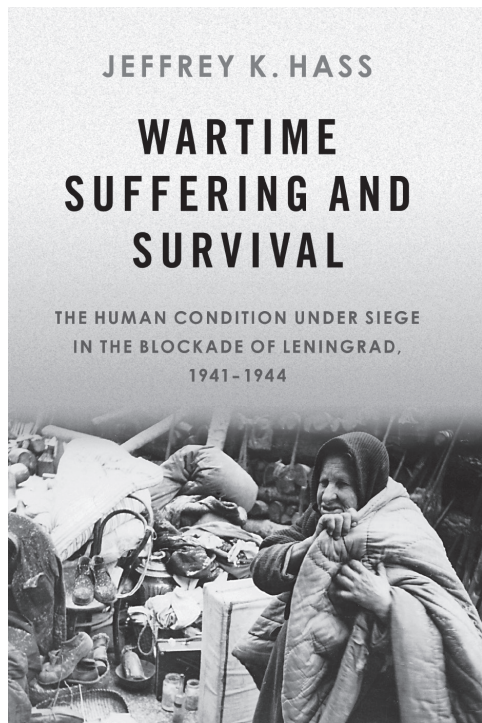
J. K. Hass

Introduction: Wartime Suffering and Survival

Who are we when our backs are against the wall? The Blockade of Leningrad provides an important glimpse into this important issue, not only for making sense of universal explanations, but also for making sense of the historical context (Stalinism, Bolshevism, Soviet civilization). In the face of starvation and mass death, was there a *homo sovieticus* responding to trauma and survival in a different manner than a person elsewhere in human history? How do habits and structures retain significance (if any) in the face of duress? What holds groups and communities together when survival incentives can favor oneself over others? In the Blockade, what happened to political identities, institutions, authority, and cultural tropes when survival was at stake?

These issues, and others, are at the heart of Jeffrey Hass' recent book on the Blockade of Leningrad¹, a work of scholarship fourteen years in the making. Drawing on archival materials (diaries, recollections, various state and Party documents), Hass reveals how “anchors of valence” — entities of personal significance and investment — linked suffering civilians into broader fields of social structure. Gender and class, for example, persisted and were reinforced because of survival strategies vis-à-vis anchors (children and significant Others, food, the dead). The institutional order was challenged but ultimately survived in part because of complementary and sometimes parasitic relations between

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civilians, entrepreneurial actors, and the authorities. In making sense of suffering, Leningraders rethought some political meanings, such as a community of suffering underpinning the new “nation” that might have been outgrowing the Bolsheviks.

Further, we use this roundtable not only to explore one book, but also to dive into important issues that cover wide ground: the nature of Bolshevism and Stalinism; the staying power (or lack thereof) of “history”; methods of inquiry and narrative; the nature of power and institutions; the relation of the individual actor to social and material contexts; and others. These are issues that have animated scholarship and debate within the humanities and social sciences and between the humanities and social sciences. And the Blockade brings them all to the fore. The Blockade is an event that was tragic but can also contribute lessons about who and what we are and could be. It behooves us to find some triumph in the tragedy so that suffering was not in vain; the Blockade could provide insights and lead to answers to

vexing questions, and we owe it to those who suffered in that event to talk about the Blockade as more than a list of names, dates, actions, and numbers.

Rather than provide a detailed overview of the complex arguments in the book, we offer here a series of overviews, reviews, critiques, and comments and the author’s responses. Our goal is to use this opportunity to provoke some further rethinking of the Blockade, of the Soviet experience of war, of the nature of survival and human resilience, and of the nature of explanation. The following reviews were offered at the Southern Conference on Slavic Studies, held in Richmond Virginia, in late February 2022 (Michael David-Fox and David Brandenberger); at the annual convention for the Association of Slavic, East European and Eurasian Societies (Andrew Sloin and Paul Christensen); plus additional reviews from colleagues from European University at St. Petersburg (Aleksei and Anastasiia Pavlovskii, and Nikita Lomagin)². The reviewers represent history and the social sciences, Americans and Russians, experts on the Blockade and on other facets of Russian politics and history. We offer this roundtable not only as the review of a book and reflections on an important historical event, but also on the nature of history, politics, and society — in Russia (the USSR) and beyond.

¹ Hass J. K. *Wartime Suffering and Survival: The Human Condition under Siege in the Blockade of Leningrad, 1941–1944* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).

² Alexis Peri, Brandon Schechter, and Richard Bidlack also participated in the November 2022 roundtable (ASEEES), but for various reasons could not submit their texts for this compilation.

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Abstract: This roundtable reviews Jeffrey Hass' *Wartime Suffering and Survival*, an in-depth historical ethnography of the Blockade of Leningrad. Reviewers address various empirical, thematic, and theoretical facets of the book and raise questions regarding each of these topics. Important issues include the nature of explanation in the humanities (especially history) and the social sciences (in this case, sociology); the role and form of power in such circumstances; and the nature of the Blockade itself as historical event. Reviews from the Southern Conference on Slavic Studies, the Association of Slavic, East European and Eurasian Societies, and European University at St. Petersburg provide further insight into the book and reflections on the Blockade. It is an important contribution to the understanding of human resilience in the face of great suffering, and its implications for history, politics, and society. It explores questions such as what happened to political identities, institutions, authority, and cultural tropes when survival was at stake, and if there is a *homo sovieticus* that responds to trauma and survival differently than a person elsewhere in human history. This roundtable seeks to provoke further rethinking of the Blockade, of the Soviet experience of war, of the nature of survival and human resilience, and of the nature of explanation.

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

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