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## War, fields, and competing economies of death. Lessons from the Blockade of Leningrad



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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 250g daily for workers in military enterprises and 125g 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.<sup>1</sup>

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?<sup>2</sup> 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 (1941–1942), 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

<sup>1</sup> Soviet-era narratives (e.g. [Pavlov, 1985](#)) and contemporary accounts say little about death except the massive death toll and how people died.

<sup>2</sup> As [Graham \(1930, pp. vii\)](#) 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.

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