

# **Resilience of the Simple? Lessons about Order from the Blockade of Leningrad**

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## One city:

- Brutal war, no clear end or victory in sight. Uncertainty & institutional strain. Cold winter, extreme food scarcity, far from competent elite.
- Truly one big Prisoners' Dilemma

## Was this:

- 1917 Petrograd (one equilibrium of the PD): order unravels here and throughout the Russian empire?
- Leningrad in 1941-42, the Blockade (other equilibrium of the PD): fine balance between decay and resilience (by its fingertips)?

***Shocks from above → survival incentives below:***

- Scarce food → shifts incentives
- Benefits of strategic innovations (for survival, gain, etc.) become **greater** than for obedience, i.e. cost/benefit calculus of obedience versus opportunism or defection shifts, within the state and between state and others
- Even concentration of resources that creates dependency power and legitimacy now a weak point in institutional coherence and authority.

# ***Forces for disaggregation at higher levels***

- ***Bureaucratic failure (or bureaucratic fubar)***
  - *Information and institutional overload*
  - *Mismatch of skills and competencies*
  - *Fiasco of evacuations → 3 million souls in Blockade ring*
- ***Institutional compromise: insider opportunism***
  - *Insiders use positions to “privatize” resources (food, etc.)*
  - *Undercuts institutional authority (dependency power)*
- ***Competing nodes of dependency*** (shadow markets)
  - *Competing nodes of dependency, orientation or loyalty?*
  - ***All this in a system set up for war!***

# ***What held things together at the top?***

## ***Resilience of the simple***

- ***Coherence and “will” and context***

Elite coherent *enough* to coordinate policies.  
Have *enough* coercion & capital to be of some relevance. E.g. NKVD not abandoning elite

- ***Parasitism***

Shadow entrepreneurs draining institutional efficacy also need those institutions (state)

# ***Conclusions on the Commanding Heights***

*Hierarchy and centralization* → risks of

- Institutional overload and bureaucratic failure
- Structure + incentives = opportunism
- *As if disaggregation to an equilibrium with enough resilience, without surrendering all coherence—i.e. devolution to new equilibrium of resilience. (Yet new inertia might sustain or accelerate disaggregation; not in 1941-42 Leningrad, but so in 1917 Petrograd.)*
- Decentered systems might have flexibility to use local knowledge and initiative. (Similar to French versus German armies in World War II, *a la* James Q. Wilson.)
- Not desired strategic decision—rather *fait accompli*



## ***The Story Below: Anchored in Empathy & Distance***

Survival & uncertainty → Prisoners' Dilemma (save my skin or others' skins?). What balances them?

- Adam Smith: empathy
- Gary Becker on love: Other in my “utility” (self)
- Prospect Theory: risk-aversion
- Anchoring: we anchor selves as well as expectations in social relations imbued with empathy & meaning → anchor us in other fields

## *Empathy, Distance, Dignity*

- *Distance*: visibility/knowledge of (suffering) Other = real person (not abstract or threat). Easier to steal from faceless bureaucracy or stranger than kin
- *Empathy*: Counter to interests: Other as self.
- *Dignity*: Why survive? Is survival just physical? (This comes up with death, class, and theodicies.)  
“Rational action” feels *compelled*
- Add it up: attractive, *ordering* forces

## *Anchoring and valences*

- Sense of self and “the Other” (Simone de Beauvoir meets Gary Becker) → risk-aversion vis-à-vis this Other who is part of my “self”
- Example: gender—women and children  
mothers ↔ children ↔ teachers

Empathy (helpless children) + sense of self anchored in children—the child links fields of home & school or work

## ***Conclusions from below***

- Just as for higher-level order, there might be primordial equilibrium grounded in empathy, distance, anchoring
- Empathy & risk-aversion: we are creatures of order. (How this leads to power, structures, etc. is another story)

## *Overall thoughts*

- Disaggregation from bureaucratic failure, possibly to lower-level equilibrium
- Centrifugal (opportunism) can also be centripetal (parasitism)
- Lower levels: distance & empathy, anchoring self in Others shared by lower-level fields

Complexity → simplicity?

How generalizable?

## ***Entertainingly wild speculation #1***

Centrifugal vs centripetal forces could be modeled as an *inverted U-shaped curve*

- *x*-axis = increasing threat (uncertainty, suffering)
- *y*-axis = likelihood of innovations (survival, opportunism) that undermine order

## *Entertainingly wild speculation #2*

- Collapse of a star = gravity versus electrostatic repulsion. Whatever balance → get a nova or a black hole
- Are “complexity” (or “information”) and “empathy” the equivalents—for a social nova or black hole? (Can we follow the lead of the gravity model of internat’l trade & use real “scientific” model here?)