

The Art of the Bribe: Corruption Under Stalin, 1943-1953 by James Heinzen. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2016, 406p. ISBN 978-0-300-17525-7

James Heinzen's book on bribery in Stalin's times came out to an impressive acclaim from the scholars. It is a welcome addition to the catalogue of everyday practices in totalitarian regimes, such as denunciation, *blat*, patronage and others documented in the works of Sheila Fitzpatrick, Stephen Kotkin, Gábor T. Rittersporn, Yoram Gorlizki and Oleg Khlevnyuk. The archival evidence of the 'bribery practices' at the core of the Stalinist dictatorship highlights the defects of its 'totalitarian' reading and places this work in the vein of social revisionism in history. The book has three parts and eight chapters, but chapters are fairly independent and can be read in any order. The first part focuses on bribery as criminal offence. The second part explores euphemisms for bribery in daily discourse and the ways in which acceptance of bribery became accommodated amidst the ideological pressure of the regime - the importance and the workings of brokerage are of particular interest here. The third part looks into political implications of bribery and related practices and concludes with a set of wider, cross-discipline, perspectives on bribery as practice.

Of particular interest to the reader would be the court cases, criminal sentences, and also the material documenting the variety of avenues for getting around the oppressive system in a 'bottom up' way. Considering contexts and circumstances, provided by Heinzen, practices of bribe-taking can be viewed, somewhat paradoxically, as an expression of humanity, functioning to soften the rigidity of the inhumane regime. Heinzen provides multiple examples of informal payments given and taken with a purpose of restoring justice, particularly where formal sentences were too harsh for such offences as, say, under-performance at a workplace (eight years). Importantly, the book highlights the distinction between *zakonnost'* and *spravedlivost'*, lawfulness and justice, by showing that many Soviet legal constraints were set up so harshly that it would be impossible not to violate them. Such rigid constraints have forced people to cross the line for getting life essentials, thus sustaining the gap between facades and reality, best described in the idiomatic formulae: 'the harshness of the laws is compensated by their non-observance'.

This does not mean that all people participated in bribery, but creating the guilt of transgression and the sense of inevitability of punishment (even if temporarily suspended) have become important tools of the Soviet regime. In a sense, the Soviet ideology has replaced religion, whereby the love and fear of God gave way to the love and fear of Stalin. The idea of suspended punishment – always possible as it was not feasible to survive without the 'sin' of violating the rules of the system – have been central to the workings of the Stalinist system, together with practices of alleviating the punishment or 'adjusting' rigid sentences through informal payments (just as practices of absolution and charity donations to the church). To continue this parallel, no defects could ever be attributed to the leadership or the principles of the socialist doctrine – all the blame was to be taken by petty sinners, small individuals in dire need of 'elevation' to the socialist mind-set.

The longevity of the system was served by the informal practices and enhanced by them. The relationship between the over-controlling centre and its so-called 'parasitic practices' was in fact symbiotic. In this sense, payments for leniency, gifts of gratitude and other context-rich practices are not only the case of self-interested giving, but also picking up the bill on behalf of the state doctrine and sharing the burden (or transaction costs, as economists would say) of the overregulation. It was convenient for the new system to claim that bribery is a birthmark of capitalism. Somewhat ironically, for the last three decades corruption was mostly associated with transitions from authoritarian regimes or communist economies. What is better understood now from the failures of multiple best conceived and best funded anti-corruption policies is that practices of 'gaming the system' are universal and, essentially, a part of the human nature: not only driven by greed and self-interest, but also by need and altruism.

The ambivalence of human nature is expressed in the ambivalence of human behaviour: as depicted on the cover of the book, the same bureaucrat in charge of the top-down fight against bribery was also involved in the bottom-up resistance to this official campaign in some cases, the same bureaucrat who minds his own interest does also cater for the needs of people. The grey zones between bureaucratic greed vs the pressure from those who needed to get things done; between discretion and compassion of judges, on the one hand, and informal norms prescribing the relatives of the victim to help their nearest and dearest by all means possible; between seeking competitive advantage vs human survival strategy are well documented in Heinzen's analysis. To a large extent, such grey zones account for the fact that the Soviet regime, not capable to operate according to its own rules, was capable of functioning that long. The Criminal Code was applied selectively and demonstratively, thus accounting for the low number of bribery cases documented in the Stalin's period vis-a-vis the widespread practice. Scandals and informal signals have informed judges on what's too harsh and what's too lenient, and society's practical norms prescribed as what was or wasn't acceptable behaviour under which circumstances. Engaging in practices of bribery under totalitarian regime, people have ensured their own livelihood, but also helped the system to function in a context-sensitive way.

This book is the first archival study of the post-war period from the perspective of bribery. Its detail and context amount to the historical ethnography of the art of bribery, with its rules and rituals, practices of entering bribery deals and ethical boundaries within the unethical deals. Focus on what was acceptable in the Stalinist regime in Heinzen's analysis takes us beyond the customary dichotomies of legal/illegal and ethical/unethical. The multitude of shades of grey in the gap between the lawfulness and justice makes readers to arrive at the uncomfortable truth: under certain circumstances, to give or to take a bribe turned out to be human.

A similar approach drives the so-called quantitative conceptions of morality, whereby a borderline between a payment to restore fairness and a payment that abuses the system is context-bound and enacted in practical norms. Heinzen questions the legitimacy of the party-state that had little respect for the rule of law, executed mass arrests and imposed outrageously severe sentences for petty crimes against state property. He also relativizes distinctions between the non-monetary, and often altruistic, *blat* exchanges and the criminalised offence of self-interested bribery. Apart from an inevitable overlap, whereby *blat* might enable and equip an entry to the bribery situation (by suggesting how much to give and who to approach), practices of bribery, supposed to be well-defined the Criminal Code; transactional in nature (exclude personal relationship existing before or after the transaction), involve explicit exchange (the request is articulated, the sum is determined), and be calculable in value (as opposed to favours), appear to be much less impersonal even when documented in court proceedings. Heinzen's analysis adds multiple dimensions to our understanding of social and cultural complexity of authoritarian regimes and will be of interest to colleagues and students in political science, history, social anthropology and legal studies.

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