

BOOK REVIEW

Bread and Autocracy: Food, Politics, and Security in Putin's Russia, by Janetta Azarieva, Yitzhak M. Brudny, and Eugene Finkel, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2023, \$99 (Hardcover), ISBN 9780197684368, \$29.95 (Paperback), ISBN 9780197684375.

Bread and Autocracy: Food, Politics and Security in Putin's Russia by Janetta Azarieva, Yitzhak M. Brudny, and Eugene Finkel is an insightful study of the role of food in Russia's political system through the early Soviet period to the present, with the greatest emphasis on the Putin era. While the politics of food provision tends to be relegated to the study of lower income countries, rather than to highly industrialized economies or leading powers like Russia today, this book convincingly shows that understanding Putin's Russia requires an examination of the phenomenon of food, filling a gap, if not a blind spot, in the scholarly literature on Russian politics. In addition to shedding light on important developments in Russian politics, the book offers a case study of how policies related to food provision and food security shape the evolution of an economic and political regime based on the heightened use of state power.

This research was motivated by the observation that Russia under Putin went from a country that experienced food insecurity over multiple decades to one that became the largest exporter of grain to the world, not to mention a major supplier of meat and dairy to global markets. This development gained widespread attention in the months following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, when fears that food shortages and price hikes in agricultural products would create severe challenges for the world's poor. These worries stemmed from the importance of Ukraine *and* Russia in world grain markets, in turn inspiring Turkey, a major food importer from Russia, to lead the negotiations to ensure sustained grain exports to global markets. This book tells the tale of how and why Putin turned Russia into a major producer of food staples for domestic consumption and for export. The authors argue that Putin was convinced by the arguments of his Minister of Agriculture, Aleksei Gordeev, who wanted Russia to become self-sufficient in food. Gordeev rejected theories of comparative advantage in global trade and instead advocated that Russia build its own agricultural capacity. The arguments in favor of making Russia fully food secure were abetted by Putin's own experience growing up in Leningrad, a city that experienced a tragic blockade and famine during World War II, and by Russians' broader experiences with Soviet-era food shortages and inflation, leading to disgruntlement and even open dissent. For example, the food riots and a bloody crackdown in Novochoerkassk in 1962 offered an important lesson for regime stability. Likewise, claims of the superiority of the Communist system over capitalism failed to resonate with the citizenry when unreliable access to food persisted. Indeed, all three authors acknowledge their own personal experience with food insecurity in the late Soviet period, reminding the reader of just how recent and vivid the memory of food insecurity is for Russians today. They argue that Putin made food security a central goal of his administration in order to ensure his legitimacy and long-term hold on power.

There are many aha moments in the book, even for someone who follows Russian politics closely, like the authors' explanation for Russia's countersanctions on food imports in 2014. The Kremlin famously imposed unpopular bans on food imports from the West, followed by the burning of agricultural contraband in public displays. The book describes how these acts sparked angry responses as Russians felt that confiscated food could have been redirected to the poor. But enforcement of the bans was strong and remains in force today, despite enduring inflation across multiple products. Curiously, the authors explain that a food import ban had been an attractive policy to the Kremlin long before put into effect in 2014, but membership in the WTO complicated

the pursuit of Russian food independence. Once the West imposed sanctions on Russia following the annexation of Crimea, however, Putin seized this opportunity to ban Western food imports in pursuit of food independence. As puzzling as the countersanctions were at the time, this book provides a convincing explanation for both the timing, persistence, and the deeper motivation of Russia's import bans relating them to regime consolidation.

While *Bread and Autocracy* does not provide a generalizable theory, it does offer an especially useful case study of this relationship between food and autocracy in Russia. The analysis is contextualized in the comparative politics and political-economy literature, showing how the study of food and autocracy in Russia relates to the theorizing of James Scott, Robert Bates, Alexander Gerschenkron, and Barrington Moore, among others. Additionally, the book offers crucial insights for the market transitions literature, elucidating the challenges of the 1990s privatization and rationalization of agriculture. The book shows the difficulty of transforming Soviet peasants into modern capitalist farmers, which was unexpected given the vast evidence of the productivity of small-scale household cultivation during Soviet times. It turns out that unleashing the market in agriculture in the 1990s did not result in the expected burst of output. While shortages ended, the book argues that small-scale farmers lacked the skills and physical capital to boost production. Only once the state made food production a priority with the emergence of state-driven agro-capitalism did Russia's ascent to the position of a major world grain, dairy, and meat exporter become possible.

Offering valuable insights into the role of food in Russian politics, *Bread and Autocracy* is well written, absorbing, and highly accessible, making it suitable for both undergraduate and graduate students. Most importantly, the book is essential reading for anyone hoping to understand Russia better, including scholars and policy experts. While Russia watchers have long understood they must pay attention to the role of oil, this book shows that they must also pay attention to the role of food in order to make sense of key developments in Russian politics.

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