



**A Review of RYAN TUCKER JONES, *RED LEVIATHAN: THE SECRET HISTORY OF SOVIET WHALING*. Chicago, IL; London: University of Chicago Press, 2022, 269 pp.**

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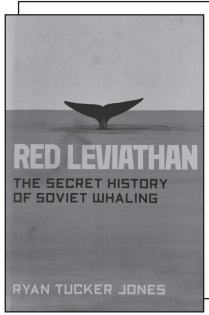
**Abstract:** The book is dedicated to the history of Soviet whaling and traces it from prehistory, dating back to pre-Petrine times, to the ban on whaling at the end of the Soviet period. The author constructs an impressive narrative, aiming to demonstrate the connection between the formation, development, and decline of the Soviet social, political and economic system as a whole, and the development of whaling. He presents this history as the result of quite complex interactions between the various groups of actors involved, including the whales themselves, which to a certain extent were able to exercise their own agency in conditions where they were being hunted on a massive scale.

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A Review of **Ryan Tucker Jones**, *Red Leviathan: The Secret History of Soviet Whaling*. Chicago, IL; London: University of Chicago Press, 2022, 269 pp.

The book is dedicated to the history of Soviet whaling and traces it from prehistory, dating back to pre-Petrine times, to the ban on whaling at the end of the Soviet period. The author constructs an impressive narrative, aiming to demonstrate the connection between the formation, development, and decline of the Soviet social, political and economic system as a whole, and the development of whaling. He presents this history as the result of quite complex interactions between the various groups of actors involved, including the whales themselves, which to a certain extent were able to exercise their own agency in conditions where they were being hunted on a massive scale.

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The American scholar Professor Ryan Jones of Oregon State University has been working for a long time on the history of the complex interrelationship between Russian science, state and society and the nature of the North Pacific. His works must be taken into account in writing the history of the exploitation of these localities [Jones 2014]. It is all the more interesting to look at his new book and try to assess it in the context of the development of some major trends in historiography. The subject of the research appears manifestly apart from mainstream study of Soviet history (and the marine history of Russia as a whole, not only of the Soviet period). Jones is interested in how the whaling industry came into being, developed, flourished and declined in the USSR.

The historiography of Imperial and Soviet Russia, including literature published both at home and abroad, is in this sense clearly at odds with worldwide tendencies. Whaling was one of the first global industries in history. For several centuries whale blubber was the basis for the global market in fats. It was the fuel for lighting European and American cities, the raw material for the production of soap and paints, the basis of compounds for treating hides. In Japanese and Norwegian cultures whale meat was also an important source of animal protein, one of the specialities of the local food culture. As a result,

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there has emerged an extensive scholarly literature describing the history of whaling in every corner of the oceans from the Middle Ages to the present day. Moreover, whaling and whalers have long been an integral part of world culture. They are to be seen on the canvases of Abraham Storck and J. M. W. Turner and on the pages of Herman Melville and Jules Verne. Still, the part of this history that is connected with Russia is quite poorly known, and full of all kinds of incompleteness and error. Ryan Jones's book is particularly valuable from this point of view, both as an attempt to overcome this incompleteness and error, and as a kind of outcome of the many years of their influence on the tradition of how the very problem of the genesis and development of whaling in Russia and the USSR was perceived.

Jones constructs the narrative of his book along the course of ecological history, starting with the question of how the international reputation of Soviet whalers as predators acting beyond the bounds of international limitations on the industry came about, and to what extent that reputation reflected the real situation, considering that overall the USSR killed fewer whales than many countries that also exploited that marine resource (p. XV). In the first chapter he tries to address prehistory and show that whaling was an integral part of the history of Russia since olden times, but it is dubious how successful he has been in this attempt. The fact that until the large-scale industrial exploitation of the resources of the North Pacific (which began only at the end of the nineteenth century) the Pacific whale population was exploited primarily by the local aborigines, while Russians historically hunted marine mammals in the seas of the European Arctic, first of all in the White and Barents Seas, means that the chapter is a disparate element in a book dealing largely with events in the Pacific Ocean and around the shores of the Antarctic.

Not being a specialist on the history of the Russian North, nor having any substantial experience of working with archival documents relating to the history of that region in the Early Modern period, Jones has based this part of his book entirely on published sources and literature, but this in itself is no great problem. The difficulty is that he makes extremely free use of this information, not always making the effort to approach it critically.

Thus, Jones makes extensive use of Ernst Webermann's *Russlands Walfischerei* (1914): eleven out of the twenty-six references in the first chapter refer to it, and that, let us note, is nothing unusual. Webermann's work is still in great demand and often cited. The problem is that Webermann himself was not a professional historian, which is very noticeable when reading him. Ernst Constantin Webermann (alias Ernst Abramovich Veberman) was an economist, born in what is now Estonia, and went to the North for the first time

only in 1917 in order to study the local fisheries [Tambi 2020], and had no notion of the methods of historical research. As a result, his book — at least that part that deals with the period before the nineteenth century — is to a large extent simply a distillation of the aforementioned incomplete and erroneous materials. Without going into a detailed analysis, we may note that Webermann interpreted any mention of hunting marine animals in historical sources extremely broadly, silently assuming that these mentions related to whaling. Sometimes this approach assumed altogether grotesque forms, as when “Tsar Kitovras”, mentioned in Old Russian literature, was treated as a creature able to rule people in the form of a man and animals in the form of a whale [Webermann 1914: 14]. However, it was already very well known in Webermann’s time that the *kitovras* of Old Russian literature was a centaur, that is, a mythical being that had nothing to do with whales.

Having constructed the chapter on the basis of such seriously outdated work, Jones has missed the opportunity to ask a really big question: why, in fact, do we silently assume that the people dwelling along the coast of North Russia, economically active in the Middle Ages and Early Modern period, must have been interested in whaling and contributed to its development? Should we not suppose that their strategies for exploiting the seas of the European Arctic were not, for perfectly objective reasons, founded on such a resource as whales? In the light of such a supposition the failure of government attempts to develop whaling on Spitsbergen, relying on the monopoly companies that existed from 1703 to 1768, looks like the natural consequence of the clash of ideas born in the imperial capital with the realities of the economic life of the northern peasants, which had remained practically unchanged for centuries. As a result, the first chapter of the book has no part in the current revision of historical narratives about Russian economic initiatives on Spitsbergen in the eighteenth century and their relation to government attempts to Europeanise Russia. In particular, one might speak of the development of whaling as a sort of manifestation of the European, progressive way of exploiting the natural resources of the ocean. Moreover, not having asked that big question, Jones thereby foreordains that the whole subsequent narrative will depend on a partially false premise.

In describing the next events that took place in the Far East and later in the Antarctic at the end of the nineteenth and in the twentieth century, Jones, however, displays great skill and industry. The story is full of details and based on a meticulous search through Russian regional and central archives. Yet the author still ducks the main question: to what extent is the idea, still unquestioned, that it was profitable and vitally necessary for the commercial seafarers of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Russia to put significant effort

into the development of whaling, deserving of such absolute trust? In his sympathetic examination of the efforts of the enthusiasts of Late Imperial and Early Soviet times, be it the businessman Otto Lindholm (1832–1914), to whom the second chapter is devoted, or the central figures in the third chapter, the researchers Vladimir Arsenyev (1872–1930) and Boris Zenkovich (1903 — after 1970), Jones does not consider the question of the extent to which their projects were at any level practicable, given the whole gamut of conditions — economic, natural, social and cultural — prevailing at that moment. By framing the question with reference to these issues, he could probably have come to interesting conclusions about why the attempts to develop the whaling industry were unsuccessful in market economy conditions, yet in the end produced results under the conditions of the Soviet planned economy with its strict state control and the lack of any free choice for the economic actors in their strategies of economic activity.

Jones follows certain principles extremely consistently in his book. He tries to describe the history of disparate, discrete efforts to develop whaling over a long period as a single, integral narrative. To this end, he tries to trace a continuity between whaling development projects in different aspects and on many levels over the whole period from the end of the nineteenth century to the second half of the twentieth. The book presents connections between plans worked out in the Russian Empire and the enterprises of Soviet times, between pre-war and post-war whaling expeditions. In this way, the author demonstrates a genetic link between the activity of pre-revolutionary enthusiasts and the pre-war *Aleut* flotilla, and then between the heritage of that undertaking and the post-war efforts to create the *Slava* whaling flotilla, which managed in the end to become a successful and even aggressive participant in the international whaling industry.

This same aim of constructing a single integral narrative is also served by the stress on the link between strategies to develop the whaling industry and general tendencies in the country's development. Jones thus declares that the shift in the overall paradigm of the post-war development of the USSR after Stalin's death and Khrushchev's rise to power, when the idea of a military confrontation with the capitalist world largely gave way to the atmosphere of economic competition, had a direct effect on the state's general approach to the organisation of the activity of the *Slava* flotilla and determined the particular place of its commander, Alexey Solyanik, in the picture of the world entertained by Soviet society in the 1950s and early 1960s. Jones places him among the cult heroes of the period, alongside Gagarin, and draws a parallel with the bearers of masculine images in authority, including Khrushchev himself and even Vladimir Putin.

A continuation of this line of narrative is an excursus into the everyday life of the whalers, revealing many typical features that belonged precisely to the Soviet way of life and outlook. These include, for example, a quite noticeable proportion of women on board, which was unusual for whalers from other countries. Thus, there were twelve women on board the *Aleut* when she came to Honolulu in 1932, including the captain's wife, which caused a sensation. The author also notes the specific place of whalers in Soviet society, which was connected with their relatively high income and their opportunities to spend time overseas. Overall, Jones creates a rather inflated picture of socialist reality, defined by such phenomena as socialist competition, collective control designed to educate the New Man, and the idea of the importance of the collective contribution to the building of socialist industry.

Finally, the unity of the narrative is formed by means of emphasising and revealing the link between the Russian and Soviet whaling projects and the dynamic history of the international whaling industry on its way from its heyday to prohibition. There is no deviation from this line: the author points both to the official participation of Soviet delegations in the congresses of the International Whaling Commission and to the place of Soviet scientists in the appearance and intensification of opposition to the very idea of the industrial slaughter of whales, which finally led to the prohibition of whaling and to the end of it as a global industry. An important part of this narrative line is the demonstration of the autonomous role of the whales themselves as representatives of nature endowed with their own agency, which change their behaviour under human pressure.

In the light of this aim of constructing a single narrative free of contradictions, it is noteworthy what approach the author has towards explaining the origins and reasons for the USSR's renunciation of whaling. According to Jones, the reasons for this event were complicated, manifested themselves at different times, and were in no way co-ordinated with each other, so that they produced a sort of cumulative effect only after the minor shifts that they produced had all combined.

On the one hand, this set of processes is about the specifics of the Soviet administrative system of directing the economy, largely founded on the principles of bureaucratic infighting. After the acceptance in 1956 of the Sixth Five-Year Plan, which required, among other things, a significant increase in the ocean fishing catch, Soviet whalers acquired an influential opponent in the form of the USSR Ministry of Fisheries. Limited resources did not allow the simultaneous development of whaling and the ocean fishing fleet, and the latest achievements of the whalers were not a priority for

the ministry, since they were not key indicators for the Five-Year Plan, which was the basis for all administrative decisions in Soviet reality.

On the other hand, as scientists came to a realisation of the vulnerability of the whale population in the world's oceans, whalers gradually lost their reputational social advantage. Soviet representatives of the industry felt the full force of this loss on their own persons. Jones finds the first noticeable manifestations of these changes in 1975, when the Soviet whaling ship *Dalniy Vostok* was attacked by Greenpeace activists. He traces how the Soviet Union was gradually drawn into international activities to save the whales and finally faced up to the necessity of a complete ban on the industry. It is important that this ban was the result of complex interactions between scientists from various countries, the organs of government and the native population of Chukotka, whose way of life, with traditions going back centuries using whales as the basis for survival in harsh conditions had continued throughout the Soviet period, and had not to be lost because of the ban on industrial whaling.

In summing up, Jones puts forward the curious (and certainly by no means indisputable) idea of a close interconnection between the two histories. He links the formation, rise and fall of the Soviet Union as probably the greatest Utopia in human history with the large-scale, practically heedless exploitation of natural resources. Whales, which were on the edge of complete extermination, suffered perhaps more than any other creature, and the history of their salvation, in which they themselves played a certain role, is closely connected with the formation and dismantling of the Soviet approach to the use of the world's oceans.

It goes without saying that Jones's book is only the first step in research into the Soviet whaling experience. The subtitle chosen by the author, which promises the reader a "secret history", is, of course, far too sensational. It is more a question of an unknown history, of phenomena and events that still await an adequate explanation. In this way, one cannot help noticing that the purely economic aspects of the history of Soviet whaling have remained on the periphery of the author's attention, and the reader receives no clear idea of the contribution of whaling to the GDP of the USSR. Furthermore, since he uses for the most part the methodological tools of ecological history, Jones bypasses the opportunities afforded by recent work directed towards a reinterpretation of maritime history as an independent area of historiography [Harlaftis 2020]. He does not make use of geographers' concept of *maritimity* as an indicator of a society's involvement in multifarious interaction with marine nature. At present this concept is being actively adopted as

a methodological tool by the humanities and social sciences, furthering a reinterpretation of the history of the interaction between society and the sea [Tuddenham 2010]. It is important that the history of whaling provides every opportunity for this, indicating the dynamics of Soviet maritimity at a great variety of levels, from the formation of administrative mechanisms to the origins and changes in the system of culturally significant images that catch the public's imagination. There is still much for us to discover and understand as we ponder the results attained by our American colleague.

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