The Man-Made Famine of 1932-1933 in Soviet Ukraine

by
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BACKGROUND

In 1933 millions of people in the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic died of famine. Unlike most famines, the Ukrainian famine of 1933 was not caused by some natural calamity or crop failure, rather it was man-made. The famine was a consequence of the Soviet government's campaign in the Ukrainian countryside, a campaign whose toll equalled, if not surpassed, Ukraine's losses during the Second World War.

The immediate background to the famine was the problem of meeting highly unrealistic goals set by the Stalinist leadership in the first five-year plan. It must be remembered that throughout most of the 1920s Stalin opposed planning and industrialization. Had preparations for industrialization been made early in the 1920s, this would have allowed time to rationalize economic strategies and permit their more gradual implementation. Instead, it was only in 1928-9 that Stalin, very abruptly, changed direction. The result was a highly improvised and 'dilettantish' first five-year plan. Rudzutak, a leading Soviet economic official, was later to report (1934) many instances of the chaos which existed in industry at that time. For example, plans for the Tagil engineering works had to be altered nine times in twenty-six months, involving a loss of several hundred million rubles. As a result of poor and hasty planning, fifty per cent of the manufactures produced by the Stankolit works in Moscow was entirely useless.[1] Because too many projects had been started simultaneously, and too many resources had been wasted through bureaucratic incompetence, by 1930 an acute shortage of capital was making itself felt.

At this time, the depression in the West caused world grain prices to drop sharply in relation to those of manufactured goods, compounding the effects of Soviet economic mismanagement. In order to industrialize, equipment from the West had to be imported. To pay for it, the USSR exported grain. Now, more grain would have to be exported for the same quantity of equipment. More grain had to be squeezed out of the peasantry and the quickest method of doing this was, in the words of Stalin, "to establish a system whereby the collective farmers will deliver to the state and the cooperative organizations the whole of their marketable grain under penalty . . .."[2] Ukraine, as the Soviet Union's major grain producing area, was singled out for accelerated collectiviation.[3]

THE SOCIALIZATION OF UKRAINIAN AGRICULTURE

The scope of collectivization that was proclaimed caught everyone, including the Communist Party of Ukraine (CPU) and state officials, by surprise. In the autumn of 1929, several months before "total collectivization" was ordered, collective farms (of all kinds) represented a mere 3.7 per cent of Ukraine's arable land and 5.6 per cent of the total number of rural households. This was the meagre result of almost two years of intensive campaigning for the voluntary formation of collective farms. The original version of the first five-year plan called for collectivization of approximately ten per cent of Ukraine's arable land by the end of 1932 with rudimentary forms of collective labour as the dominant organizational form, not collective farms.[4] In November 1929, however, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) Politburo ordered collectivization in Ukraine to be speeded up in order to "intensify export and the production of raw materials for industry."[5] Initially, peasants were to have been allowed to keep livestock for their personal consumption. The revised plan called for the establishment of collective farms on 20 per cent of the republic's arable land involving 30 per cent of peasant households by the end of 1932.[6] In February 1930 the policy was again changed. All peasant households were ordered to be collectivized by the autumn of 1930 and the "complete socialization" of all peasant livestock was decreed.[7] War was declared on the Ukrainian peasant.

An essential component of forced collectivization, according to Stalin, was the "elimination of kulaks as a class" in order to "replace their output by the output of the collective farms and state farms."[8] In reality, the destruction of kulaks had little to do with economic considerations. By Stalin's own admission, kulaks supplied only a fifth of the Soviet Union's marketable grain surplus (that is, grain not consumed in the countryside). The middle level and poor peasants furnished three-quarters.[9] The procurement campaigns of 1928 and 1929 had already crippled the richer peasants as producers. In 1929, in particular, the heavy fines imposed on the richer peasants, including the confiscation of the property of 33,000 households for the non-delivery of grain quotas, undermined the economic power of this sector of the peasantry.[10]

The word "kulak" conjures up an image of a wealthy, grasping peasant. The reality had little in common with the myth. The average annual income per working peasant in the richest "kulak" household in Ukraine, that is, one with over 16.5 hectares of land, was 200 rubles in 1924. The average annual income of a worker, on the other hand, was 521 rubles, not including the many social security benefits which workers enjoyed and which were not available to the peasantry.[11] When the "dekulakization" campaign was started, the Soviet regime was at a loss for a definition of what constituted a "kulak." A haphazard set of criteria were produced. For example, a household owning a motor of any kind was classified as belonging to the "kulak" category.[12] Even the seemingly more solid definition of a kulak household as one

hiring labour, was off the mark. As M. Maksudov has shown, the majority of those employing labour in the countryside were invalids of World War I and the revolution, widows and families with few children. Some peasant households did, of course, own more land than others. But these households, as a general rule, also had larger families to support. According to agricultural surveys carried out in Ukraine in 1929, 71,500 households were classified as "kulak."[13] In the course of dekulakization campaign, which began in January 1930 and continued until 1932, 200,000 kulak households (or approximately one million people) were, according to official sources, "liquidated."[14] Dekulakization was primarily intended to rid the countryside of the natural leadership of the peasantry. As V. Gsovski noted, "it was not so much the prosperity of a peasant as his attitude towards collectivization which determined his class character."[15]

During dekulakization, kulaks had their property confiscated and were forbidden to join collective farms. The kulaks were divided into three groups. The first group, called "counter-revolutionary kulak activists," was composed of peasants who actively resisted collectivization; they were either executed or sent to prison camps and their families were deported. The "wealthiest kulaks," who made up the second group, were deported with their families to remote regions of the Soviet Union. The rest were ordered to leave their districts. These were the general rules established by the CPSU in January 1930. Their implementation varied greatly from region to region.[16] In Ukraine, the dekulakization campaign took on especially brutal forms:

> Barefooted and underclothed peasants were jammed into railroad cars and transported to the regions of Murmansk, Vologda, Kotlas and the like. This kurkulization ['kurkul' is the Ukrainian for kulak] was carried on in the Russian districts, but here it took on a more human form, if one may apply that term here. Those Russian kurkuls whose property was taken away were often allowed to remain in their villages and if they were deported they were generally deported to the western districts of Siberia or the region of Sadensk. The death rate amongst the expropriated Russian peasants was disproportionately lower . . .[17]

According to one eyewitness account, peasants were "unloaded into the snow about six feet deep. The frost registered at 75 degrees below zero . . .. Without even an axe or a saw we began building huts from tree branches. In two weeks all the children, the sick and the aged had frozen to death." The date rate among Ukrainian peasants deported to Nadezhdinsk in the Sverdlovsk region in Russia was typical: only 2,300 out of the original group of 4,800 survived the winter.[18]

UKRAINIAN RESISTANCE

Forced collectivization unleashed wide and spontaneous resistance among all strata of village society. Peasant revolts broke out in most regions of Ukraine. In Chernihiv, the 21st Red Army regiment

joined the peasant rebellion.[19] Everywhere peasants slaughtered their livestock, burnt their crops, and as many as were able fled to the cities. Rural state and party officials opposed collectivization. In 1930 a fifth of all rural state and party functionaries were dismissed on charges of "right opportunism."[20] The army, the secret police, then called the GPU, the militia and armed brigades of reliable urban party members were sent into the villages to implement collectivization. Just as in earlier revolts against the Soviet regime, during forced collectivization the village poor were in the forefront of unrest. According to a newspaper report, the slaughter of animals was carried out mostly by poor and middle peasants.[21] V.A. Iakovtsevskii, a Soviet historian, pointed out that resistance to collectivization was greatest among the poor peasants who had recently obtained land and among the middle peasantry who had recently risen from the ranks of the poor.[22]

The publication of Stalin's article "Dizzy with Success" was evidence that the Soviet leadership had become nervous about rural unrest. Stalin admitted that "excesses" had occurred during collectivization and pinned the entire blame on local officials.[23] The Ukrainian press, during the momentary thaw which followed the publication of Stalin's article, published several accounts which gave some indication of how collectivization had been carried out. The homes of poor and middle peasants, according to one report, were razed in the middle of the night and the peasants forced at gunpoint to enter collective farms. Confiscated property was often stolen by urban brigades. The militia roamed village streets arresting anyone in sight. Communalization of property in many villages extended even to clothes and footwear.[24]

SOVIET EXPLOITATION

The emphasis on the "voluntary" nature of collective farms following Stalin's article was prompted by the fear that growing peasant resistance would severely damage spring sowing. Peasants were allowed to leave collective farms and in Ukraine a mass exodus occurred. Whereas on 1 March 1930, 69 per cent of the arable land and 63 per cent of peasant households had been collectivized, by May 1930, the corresponding figures were 50 and 41 per cent.[25] This permitted the regime to get the situation in the countryside under control and it also facilitated work in the fields which resulted in a good harvest in 1930—23.1 million tonnes. That year 7.7 million tonnes of grain were taken from Ukraine, or a third of the harvest. "That Ukraine was being exploited," wrote V. Holubnychy, "can be seen from the fact that while the total grain harvest in Ukraine amounted to 27 per cent of the all-Union harvest in 1930, the consignment of grain in Ukraine accounted for 38 per cent of the grain consigned in the entire Soviet Union in 1930."[26] The amount of grain taken out of Ukraine in 1930 was 2.3 times what it had been in 1926. Three factors made this possible. Climatic conditions were optimal that year, the private sector boosted production and, finally, the requisition campaign was so intense that seed grain needed for the following year was confiscated.

Reassured by this success, forced collectivization was renewed and, by 1931, 65 per cent of rural households and 67 per cent of arable land had been collectivized. By 1933, the figures were 73 and 86 per cent respectively.[27] The 1931 quota for grain delivery to the state was set at the level achieved in 1930—7.7 million tonnes. Very early in 1932 famine appeared in Ukraine and it ravaged the countryside until the end of 1933.

ORIGINS OF THE FAMINE

In explaining why the famine occurred, two factors must be mentioned by way of providing background information. The first was the collapse of agricultural production brought about by collectivization. Rather than surrender their animals to the collectives, many peasants slaughtered them. In 1928 there were 7.0 million pigs in Ukraine, in 1933, 2.1 million; cattle declined in the same period from 8.6 to 4.4 million and the number of horses from 5.4 to 2.6 million.[28] This not only meant that meat delivery quotas could not be fulfilled, but it also accentuated what was always a major problem in Ukrainian agriculture—the shortage of draught animals. The production of tractors was in its infancy and could not replace animal power. In 1932, for example, Ukraine had on the average one tractor per collective farm.[29] Moreover, tractors were under a separate jurisdiction from the collective farms; they belonged to the Machine Tractor Stations, an arrangement which was opposed by the Ukrainian leadership on the grounds that it made an effective integration of agricultural production impossible.[30] The tractors themselves were of extremely low quality and were constantly breaking down. During the fateful harvest of 1932, to give an example, 70 per cent of the tractors in Dnipropetrovs'k oblast were inoperative in August, and by September this had increased to 90 per cent.[31] The peasantry was given no incentive to produce. By the end of 1930, 78 per cent of collective farms had failed to pay peasants their "labour days" worked.[32] Moreover, the "labour day" payment in Ukraine (in kilogrammes of food produce) was half what it was in Russia.[33] Collective farms were excessively large, reflecting the mania for gargantuan projects that dominated Stalinist economic thinking; the Ukrainian leadership had called for small "cooperative collectives."[34] Highly bureaucratized in their decision-making structure, collective farms left no room for individual or group initiatives. In 1932 some collective farm chairmen wished to sow rye instead of wheat, arguing that rye was a more suitable crop for their region. "These bearers of anti-wheat sentiments must be severely punished," was the reply that came from Moscow.[35] The combination of all these factors resulted in unbelievable chaos in production. Between 1931 and 1932 the total sowing area in Ukraine contracted by one fifth; in 1931, almost 30 per cent of the grain yield was lost during the harvest.[36]

To add to the difficulties a drought affected Ukraine. It began in 1931 and was limited largely to the steppe region.[37] In 1934 another

far more serious drought developed. The disruption in agricultural production together with climatic conditions caused relatively poor yields in 1931, 1932 and especially in 1934. The 1931 harvest, according to official sources, gave 18.3 million tonnes of grain, considerably less than the 23.1 million tonne figure of 1930. In 1932, 14.6 million tonnes were harvested, in 1933, 22.3 and in 1934, 12.3 million tonnes.[38]

The two factors we have mentioned, chaos in agricultural production and the drought, contributed to the famine, but they were not its main cause. In 1934, the year of the poorest harvest, there was no famine in Ukraine. Responsibility for the famine rested with the Stalinist leadership and the draconian grain requisition quotas that were imposed on Ukraine in order to maintain the heady industrialization pace. In 1931, 7.7 million tonnes were ordered to be requisitioned from Ukraine, the same as in 1930, even though the harvest was 20 per cent less than in 1930. Moscow ordered that the grain be obtained at any cost and applied enormous pressure to that end. Troops and police were used to take all peasant stocks. Seven million tonnes were obtained, leaving the average peasant household in Ukraine with only 112 kilogrammes of grain. "For the peasants, whose main staple had for centuries been bread, this was a catastrophe."[39] The amount of grain requisitioned was so great that the republic was short of seed grain by 45 per cent.[40]

Anxious about the impending catastrophe, the Ukrainian leadership argued with Moscow for a major downward revision of its agricultural obligation for the year 1932. The amount was lowered to 6.2 million tonnes, but this was still far above the capacities of the republic in view of the poor harvest—14.6 million tonnes of grain, of which 40 per cent was lost during the harvest because of the breakdown of machinery and the muddled transportation system.[41] To ensure that the Ukrainian party obeyed orders, a special mission headed by Molotov and Kaganovich arrived in Kharkiv (then the capital of Ukraine). Every conceivable method was used to extract 6.2 million tonnes. The state and party apparatus was purged in those regions that lagged behind in grain requisition; newspapers that failed to campaign aggressively for the collection of grain had their staffs dismissed; every third person holding a responsible position in the collective farms was purged; troops and armed brigades were sent into the villages to carry out mass repression of peasants who did not surrender their last morsel of bread.[42]

It was during the August 1932 harvest that the infamous law was passed stipulating the death penalty and, under exceptional circumstances, a ten year sentence in a labour camp, for "theft of socialist property."[43] Visiting assizes of the regional court of Dnipropetrovs'k oblast, for example, sentenced peasants to the firing squad for the theft of a sack of wheat.[44] Ukrainian farmers became "the most numerous" among "political offenders" in the Soviet Gulag.[45] According to the last available information, in early January 1933, 75 per cent

of the grain quota was fulfilled, that is, 4.7 million tonnes.[46] This left the average peasant family with 80 kilogrammes of grain with which to feed itself.[47]

The famine, which began in January 1932, finally subsided in 1934, when the 1933 harvest was brought in. This was because Ukraine, lacking 55 per cent of its seed grain, was "lent" seed grain by Moscow and, more significantly, Moscow reduced the quantity of grain to be delivered to the state to 5.0 million tonnes even though the 1933 harvest was 22.3 million tonnes of grain.[48] 1934 could have been a famine year as well since the grain harvest was a mere 12.3 million tonnes. It was not, however, because the amount of grain requisitioned was reduced further and Stalin even released grain from existing stocks to feed the population.[49] He could have done something similar in 1932-3, but he did not, and one of the worst famines in human history raged in Ukraine.

What is important to stress about the 1932-3 famine in Ukraine is that it was artificially created and that no effort was made to relieve the plight of its victims. When Ukraine was famine-striken, the Soviet regime exported 1.7 million tonnes of grain to the West.[50] The offers of international relief organizations to assist the starving were rejected on the grounds that there was no famine in Ukraine and hence no need to aid its victims.[51] Moreover, the borders of Ukraine were closely patrolled, and starving Ukranian peasants were not allowed to cross into Russia in search of bread.[52]

THE TOLL

Because many eyewitness accounts of the famine have been published it is unnecessary to describe in detail the ghastly scenes which were to be observed in Ukraine throughout 1932 and 1933. However, something has to be said about the famine as a human experience for the event cannot be understood only through the presentation of the economic factors which brought it about. Victor Kravchenko, a former Soviet official, wrote that "on the battlefield men die quickly, they fight back, they are sustained by fellowship and a sense of duty." But in Ukrainian villages throughout 1932-3, he observed, "I saw people dying in solitude by slow degrees, dying hideously . . .. They had been trapped and left to starve, each in his home, by a political decision made in a far-off capital around conference and banquet tables."[53]

The main victims of the famine were not even the imagined enemies of the Soviet regime, the kulaks, since they had been eliminated by 1932 when the famine began. It was the poor and middle peasantry who died agonizing deaths in the millions. The deaths of hundreds of thousands of children was perhaps the most horrible scene to be observed in Ukraine. They would lie on the streets and in the ditches, trying to gather their remaining energy to look for something to eat. Often they were so weak that they would remain lying there, until death released them from their agony. "The poor children," wrote a German agricultural expert who travelled through-

out Ukraine in 1933, "perished like wild beasts."[54] Hundreds of thousands of children were orphaned and many of those foraged the countryside in search of food and were ultimately eliminated by troops and the police by means of mass executions.[55]

What happened in the village of Pleshkan in the Poltava district was typical. Prior to the famine the village had 2,000 inhabitants. Only 982 people survived by eating everything, all the dogs and cats, the bark of trees, all sorts of roots. There was a school in the village before 1932-3, with all four rooms filled with children. After the famine the school was closed—there were no children left to attend it.[56]

CONCLUSION

How many died? How many millions perished? Harry Lang, editor of the left-wing Jewish daily *Forward*, published in New York, visited Ukraine in 1933 and was told by a high-ranking state official: " 'Six million people perished from the famine in our country . . ..' The official paused, and repeated, 'Six million.' "[57] According to the 1926 census there were 31.2 million Ukrainians in the USSR, while the 1939 census results indicated the number of Ukrainians had declined to 28.1 million. Over a thirteen year period the number of Ukrainians diminished by 11 per cent. The population of the USSR, on the other hand, increased by 16 per cent, the number of Russians by 28 per cent.[58] The exact number of deaths attributable to the famine will never be known. Even so, most specialists, including those such as Maksudov, among dissident circles in the Soviet Union, are of the opinion that approximately six million Ukrainians perished during the famine.[59]

The effects of the experience of collectivization and the famine on the attitudes of the peasantry may have been reflected in the findings of the Harvard Project on the Soviet Social System which interviewed Soviet refugees after the Second World War. When asked "whether or not it would be a good idea to drop an atom bomb on Moscow," half the Ukrainian collective farmers answered yes, twice the proportion of the Russian collective farmers.[60] The Ukrainian peasantry seethed with hatred for Moscow, yet Moscow's agrarian policies had destroyed them as a social force. The Ukrainian village was silenced and never again rose in opposition to the Soviet regime.

The tragedy of the Ukrainian peasantry was a national tragedy. It was, after all, Stalin who wrote, "the peasantry represents the main army of a national movement . . .. Without the peasantry there cannot be a strong national movement."[61] While this is obviously not a transhistorical truth, it applied in that period. If, in the 1920s, the Soviet regime adopted Ukrainization policies, it was because it feared peasant unrest. When the Ukrainian peasantry was under attack in 1932-3, the Ukrainian elite, whose existence was nurtured by Ukrainization, sprang to their defence. Ewald Ammende, who analysed this question wrote:

> [T]he widest circle of the Ukrainian intelligentsia had entered the struggle; teachers, students, Soviet officials, all thought it was their duty to protest against a further sucking dry of the country. Future historians will have to admit that in the campaign against the Ukrainians, during the spring and summer of 1933, the Soviet regime was faced by a united people, a solid front, including everyone, from the highest Soviet officials down to the poorest peasants.[62]

National solidarity, which threatened Stalin's plans for Ukraine's exploitation, was fostered by Ukrainization policies. In 1933 Stalin ordered that these policies be abandoned. Ukrainization, born with the peasantry, died with it too. The Ukrainian intelligentsia, who had refused to become willing agents in the extermination of their people, was itself decimated. According to I. Lawrynenko, 80 per cent of Ukraine's creative intelligentsia was liquidated.[63]

When the casualties of the civil war, collectivization, the famine, the purges of the 1930s and the 6.8 million who died during World War II are combined, it is estimated that *more than half the male and a quarter of the female population of Ukraine perished.*[64] Such a mountain of skulls is unprecedented in human history. Along with these people, the achievements, lessons and hopes that one generation communicates to another were destroyed. Under the circumstances, it was all the more remarkable that Ukrainian society had any strength left for self-assertion in the post-war period. In summing up the 1930s it is no exaggeration to say that the Ukrainians' greatest achievement during that decade was that they outlasted it.

Footnotes

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