
Ukraine and Kazakhstan:

Comparing the Famines

Roundtable on Soviet Famines

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Anne Applebaum is one of the most prominent public intellectuals and opinion makers battling the on-going authoritarian and populist drive on both sides of the Atlantic. Her public commitment to denouncing Putin's authoritarian regime and its aggression against Ukraine is closely related to the pages of *Red Famine*, which tackles the most contentious historical event dividing the Russian and Ukrainian political classes.

Most historians who have studied the 1931–3 famine frame it primarily as either a Soviet event, or as a 'national' one. Both approaches are legitimate, but both have specific interpretative problems. On one hand, the famine was initially caused by policies implemented throughout the Soviet countryside (i.e., forced collectivisation and procurements) and struck in many areas of the country. On the other hand, there were two 'peak famine' events in Ukraine and Kazakhstan (which together account for more than 80 per cent of the victims), plus severe famines in the North Caucasus and the Volga region. These singularities require an explanation. Historians who deny that ethnic difference was a significant factor in the mass death focus either on predominantly Russian regions, or take a pan-Soviet approach, showing that the violent assault against peasant society, culture and religion was ubiquitous in the country and therefore involved no specific targeting of particular ethnic groups.

The opposite approach is to adopt the national paradigm, as Applebaum does. This approach considers the famine as part of the longer history of the Ukrainian (or Kazakh) nation, downplays the similarities with contemporary policies in other areas of the Soviet Union and often claims that Stalin used the famine as a genocidal weapon against Ukrainians (or Kazakhs). Genocide was supposedly achieved not by systematic physical extermination but by decimating the nation's cultural, religious and political elites, using the famine to kill millions, colonising the territory with outsiders and repressing crucial cultural traits (such as religious practices and local pastoral and agricultural methods). According to Applebaum, this multi-pronged attack fits Raphael Lemkin's definition of genocide, as put forward in his seminal *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe* (1944). Conversely, she claims that the UN definition

(1948) is instead not applicable. This seems a non sequitur. Once one claims that there was an intent to destroy, even in part, an ethnic/national group, as Applebaum does, the UN definition becomes immediately pertinent. As a matter of fact, Andrea Graziosi, Norman Naimark, Nicolas Werth and others, apply the UN definition to the famine precisely because it is more inclusive than the definition more often used in historical studies, which implies a planned total physical extermination of the targeted group.

For Applebaum – as for most, if not all, of the above-mentioned authors – the use of the concept of genocide in relation to Soviet Ukraine rests on an interpretative breakthrough developed by Terry Martin in his 2001 book *The Affirmative Action Empire*. No serious scholar still claims that Moscow purposefully organised the famine to exterminate the Ukrainians, or any other group. The argument for genocide now relies on showing that the Kremlin, after the famine broke out, used it as a weapon to smash what was perceived as a ‘national’ resistance to Soviet policies – thereby targeting Ukrainian peasants because they were Ukrainians, not just recalcitrant grain producers. This argument goes way beyond Martin’s position, but it is based on his reasoning. Martin showed that by the summer of 1932 Stalin interpreted peasant resistance to collectivisation and requisitions in Ukraine as a nationalist challenge to the Soviet state. Given Ukraine’s critical geopolitical position, this had the potential, if combined with external aggression, of putting Moscow’s grip on the region in jeopardy, and of endangering the overall success of collectivisation. Peasant uprisings and foot-dragging, combined with the irresoluteness of Ukrainian party cadres who were seeing the catastrophic consequences of Stalin’s policies, led the dictator to take two parallel decisions during November and December 1932. First, he hardened grain requisition measures during the worst harvest since the end of the new economic policy (NEP), thereby multiplying the number of victims of the already ongoing famine. Second, policies of Ukrainisation (both in the cultural sphere and in the promotion of cadres) were abruptly interrupted. Ukrainisation had been too successful in the eyes of Stalin, as he felt it risked the creation of a national communist administration not entirely subjugated to the Kremlin. However, Ukrainisation was resumed once the crisis had subsided, albeit to a lesser degree and with much reduced propaganda. Martin concluded that ‘the famine was not an intentional act of genocide specifically targeting the Ukrainian nation. It is equally false, however, to assert that nationality played no role whatsoever in the famine’ (305). This seems to me still the most balanced conclusion.

Historiography based on national paradigms, focusing on one single reified ethnic group, tends to entail a diachronic tunnel vision. ‘National history’ and current political predicaments are the narrative contexts framing the understanding of the event studied. This approach does not encourage comparisons and broader contextualisation. Thus, in a book aiming to highlight the singularity of the Ukrainian case within the wider Soviet famine, the comparison with other regions in the Soviet Union is at best cursory. Kazakhstan is probably the most important case in point, since it was the area in the Soviet Union that suffered most from the famine relative to population. Between 1930 and 1933 one third of the Kazakhs died, while the republic’s

population was effectively halved due to mass death and migration. The usual factor superficially invoked to explain this tragedy is a supposed violent sedentarisation of the pastoral population (about three-quarters of the Kazakhs). As a matter of fact, the famine made the Kazakhs totally dependent on the state and caused (partial) sedentarisation, not the other way around. Initially, the food crisis in Kazakhstan was provoked primarily by grain requisitions and by the disruptions provoked by collectivisation. Then, a specific decision taken by the dictator and his collaborators dramatically increased the magnitude of the famine much earlier than in Ukraine. This decision, taken in July 1930, was linked to the collapse in the numbers of livestock brought about by collectivisation everywhere in the Soviet Union (peasants often chose to slaughter their animals rather than turn them over to the collective farms). At this moment animal power was still the backbone of Soviet agriculture.

In the Soviet capitals meat was disappearing from distribution while the urban population was increasing spectacularly. Livestock mass death was already an economic problem and could become a political one if the state failed to feed workers and soldiers. A couple of days after the sixteenth Party Congress and before leaving Moscow for their holidays, the Politburo members decreed extraordinary meat and livestock requisitions from the North Caucasus and, especially, from the largest pastoral population in the Soviet Union, the Kazakhs. The procurement plan for the 1930–1 economic year amounted to up to one-third of Kazakh livestock, to be taken from a population mostly dependent on it for subsistence. Kazakhstan meat during the famine largely ended up in Moscow, Leningrad and Russian industrial centres, while livestock was distributed among collective farms outside Kazakhstan. Procurements only stopped two years later, when there was almost no livestock left in the republic (10 to 15 per cent of the pre-collectivisation level).

The flow of information from Kazakhstan to Moscow about the famine and the mass flight of the Kazakhs from their republic, consistent from at least 1931, did not lead to policy revision. The Kazakhs were consciously sacrificed in order to prop up the faltering collectivised agriculture system and to feed workers and Soviet 'elite cities'. Kazakh resistance to collectivisation and procurements was violent and widespread, but the Kremlin saw it as politically unthreatening. In September 1933 Stalin noted that what he called 'Kazakh nationalism' was much weaker and less dangerous for the Soviet state than the Ukrainian equivalent. Ukraine's geopolitical position closer to hostile powers worried Moscow much more than Kazakhstan's more protected location. However, Kazakh society was subjected to policies not dissimilar from the ones implemented in Ukraine. Deportations of the Kazakh pastoral elite started in 1928, at the same time as a wave of arrests of the former members of the Kazakh Alash movement, while religious practices and figures of authority were repressed.

If one includes the decision to carry on with procurement policies that were clearly leading to mass death, Lemkian definitions of genocide could be invoked. However, the inclusive legal definition of genocide that prevails in international law should probably be left to legal scholars – or politicians. For historians, lumping cases as different as the Shoah and the Ukrainian and Kazakh famines in the same

category does not seem useful for understanding either them or the peculiarities of the perpetrating regimes. Driven by communist ideology and a readiness to kill millions, Stalin built a system of domination that was much more exploitative, oppressive and murderous than other regimes that instead unquestionably targeted ethnic groups for extermination (think no further than Wilhelmine Germany and the Herero). In other words, we do not need the label 'genocide' for maximum political and moral denunciation.

A final point about the sources. Applebaum does a wonderful job of using the thousands of pages of published primary sources from Russian and Ukrainian archives and the transcripts of oral history projects. The result is a chilling collection of personal and family tragedies. She achieves what many studies on the Soviet famines do not: giving a face and a human dimension to both the victims and the low-level perpetrators. Applebaum describes the extremely limited room for manoeuvre that rural administrators had. Some of them tried to save abandoned or orphaned children, for instance. However, their lives were at the mercy of Stalin's envoys during the crisis of late 1932. In Ukraine and Kuban thousands of lower ranking rural administrators lagging behind in the grain procurement campaign were arrested; hundreds were executed. No matter how tempting it has been for historians to look for political agency at the lower levels of the party state during the famine, the archival record shows that the dictator took all the most consequential decisions. In my own earlier works on the famine in Kazakhstan, I suggested that the district level administrators might have played a role in allocating the damage brought by grain and livestock requisitions during collectivisation, by favouring Russians over Kazakhs. To this day, this remains just a hypothesis. On the contrary, the more sources I read in archives in Kazakhstan and Russia, the more a strong central agency in the mass death of Kazakhs becomes apparent. The Politburo decision on meat and livestock procurements for 1930/1 was the crucial watershed that explains the magnitude of the famine in Kazakhstan. A less devastating famine was probably likely to happen anyway, as previous procurements and collectivisation had already caused localised food crises in the region. When these documents are combined with statistical data about the eventual destination of the animals and their meat, the overall rationale of Stalin's policies in Kazakhstan from 1930 to 1932 emerges.

This does not mean, however, that all the important sources from the centre of the Stalinist state are at our disposal. 'Thematic' folders (*tematicheskie papki*), which include the informational documentation used by Stalin and the Politburo to take decisions on any specific topic, are sources of particular significance. As I was surprised to discover, a significant number of still inaccessible thematic folders regarding Politburo decisions during collectivisation and the famine ended up in the Politburo fond of the Russian State Archive of Contemporary History (Российский государственный архив новейшей истории; RGANI), which normally collects documentation from the post 1953 period. The accessible files contiguous to the secret ones cover peasant uprisings and collectivisation in the North Caucasus, Kazakhstan and other regions between 1930 and 1934. Most likely, the inaccessible ones also cover Ukraine, and – when and if they will be made available to scholars – might help provide a fuller picture

of the information flow between the republic and Moscow during 1932, which, as Applebaum rightly underscores, is still not complete. Research on this important event of the twentieth century is far from over.