
Questioning the Distinctiveness of the Ukrainian Famine

Roundtable on Soviet Famines

SARAH CAMERON

The collectivisation famines of the 1930s are one of the darkest and most contested chapters in Soviet history. Carried out in the name of agricultural modernisation, Stalin's policy of forced collectivisation led to immense human suffering. Somewhere between 5 to 9 million people are believed to have perished in these famines, with the burden falling disproportionately on several major food-producing regions, including Ukraine, Kazakhstan, the Volga Basin and the Don and Kuban regions of the North Caucasus. Those who survived these terrifying events found their lives transformed, and collectivisation and the accompanying famines played a crucial role in integrating the Soviet Union's vast rural population into the institutions of a 'workers' state'.

In the West the Ukrainian famine has been the clear focus of research, and a long-running debate, prompted in part by Robert Conquest's 1986 book, *Harvest of Sorrow*, has simmered over the question of whether Stalin intentionally used famine to punish Ukrainians as an ethnic group. This debate has frequently turned polemical, inflamed by ideological divisions and present-day tensions between Ukraine and Russia. In recent years many historians of the Soviet period, perhaps fatigued by the polarised nature of the debate or enticed by the promise of new research topics in the post-Second World War period, have turned away from the subject of the collectivisation famines. Though various Ukrainian research institutes in North America have continued to sponsor research into the topic, the issue has retreated somewhat from the rest of the field's view.

Anne Applebaum's book (which was produced in cooperation with the Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute (HURI)) is one of the few English-language monographs on the Ukrainian famine or collectivisation more generally to appear in the last fifteen years. Expanding upon ideas first elaborated by the historian Terry Martin in his 2001 book *The Affirmative Action Empire*, Applebaum reenters the debate over the Ukrainian famine, framing the issue for a popular audience. Her book argues that Stalin intentionally used famine to kill Ukrainians and neuter the Ukrainian national movement.

As Applebaum recognises, there are good reasons to revisit the subject of the collectivisation famines. First, even as the field itself has partly turned away from the subject of the famine, a wealth of new sources has appeared. These include rich document collections, such as the five-volume 'Tragedy of the Soviet Village' series, the three-volume 'Famine in the USSR, 1929–1934' series, and the first volume in a planned three-volume series on 'The Tragedy of the Kazakh Aul'. Important collections related to the Kazakh famine have opened at Kazakhstan's Presidential Archives (the former Communist party archives). A team of demographers affiliated with HURI has deployed new methods to recalculate the death toll for several of the collectivisation famines, enabling greater insight into how hunger affected communities at the provincial and district level. Researchers have done valuable work to unearth memoirs and collect oral history accounts, and Applebaum uses many of these sources to narrate the suffering of starving Ukrainians in moving detail.

But while these new sources have come to light, we have yet to fully understand how they might alter our interpretation of these famines. Researchers, for instance, are still debating how the finding that Ukraine's highest losses were in the boreal steppe zones of the republic's centre (as opposed to its southern grain-growing regions, as was often assumed) might affect our view of Moscow's intentions vis-à-vis Ukraine. The recently opened archival collections at the Kazakh Presidential Archives have revealed that starving Kazakhs were treated with a startling level of brutality, but these findings have not yet been integrated into broader, all-Union narratives of famine. At the same time, these new sources also raise the possibility of applying a broader range of methodological approaches. In part because of the bitter debates over the Ukrainian famine, the study of the Soviet collectivisation famines in the West has been dominated by political, state-centred approaches and, to a lesser degree, economic history. When compared with the scholarship on China's Great Leap Forward, for instance, the study of the Soviet collectivisation famines has been less methodologically diverse. New approaches, ranging from environmental history to microhistory, may help put some of the most difficult questions relating to the Soviet collectivisation famines, such as the role played by local level officials in shaping the contours of these crises, in a new light.

Another significant reason to revisit the topic of the collectivisation famines is that there is a striking information imbalance. Due to a variety of factors, ranging from a lingering Eurocentrism in the Soviet field to the attempts of some scholars to portray famine as a uniquely Ukrainian event, we know far less about famine outside of Ukraine and the largely Ukrainian-speaking Kuban. Ukraine suffered acutely due to famine (3.9 million people out of a total population of 31 million perished), but millions of people elsewhere in the Soviet Union also endured the horrors of famine. In Kazakhstan, for instance, roughly a quarter of the republic's inhabitants perished during collectivisation (1.5 million people out of a total population of 6.5 million), the highest death rate of any republic, including Ukraine. In the disaster's aftermath, Kazakhs were forced to abandon their pastoral nomadic way of life for a settled one,

a painful rupture that sparked a far-reaching transformation of Kazakh culture and identity.

The issue of the Kazakh famine raises broader questions about how to frame the story of collectivisation that are pertinent to Applebaum's narrative: what exactly is distinct about each of these famines? And to what extent can we tell the story of each famine separately? Applebaum claims that certain features of the Ukrainian famine were distinct (353), but the features that she identifies were not in fact unique to Ukraine. During the famine Kazakhstan's borders were also sealed, and thousands of Kazakhs were slaughtered as they attempted to flee across the border to China. Like the Ukrainians, starving Kazakhs also suffered from the cruel practice of blacklisting, which essentially entrapped them in zones of death where no food could be found. As in Ukraine, agricultural failures in Kazakhstan were explicitly linked to questions of national culture: as famine intensified, party members relied upon stereotypes about nomadic life, particularly the idea that nomads held an immense number of animals, to intensify their attacks on Kazakh nomadic life.

As my forthcoming book will show, the horrors of the Kazakh famine reveal that the regime's treatment of starving Ukrainians was not uniquely brutal. Though the spectre of evolutionary theory – which maintains that the disappearance of mobile peoples and their transformation into settled societies is part of the inevitable outgrowth of modernity – has long muddied interpretations of the Kazakh famine (in the literature, the Kazakh famine is often characterised as a 'mistake' or a 'miscalculation', assertions which would seem to downplay the disaster's violent nature), there was nothing natural or inevitable about the Kazakh disaster. Indeed, it might be argued that in many respects the Kazakh famine was more destructive than the Ukrainian famine, as the Kazakh famine brought about a cultural transformation, the loss of Kazakhs' nomadic way of life, that was even more extensive than that endured by the Ukrainians.

This finding should cause us to revisit how we view these famines in comparison to one another. In his contribution to this forum, Norman Naimark juxtaposes the Kazakh and Ukrainian cases, arguing that the death of starving Ukrainians was due to the regime's use of 'special measures', such as blockades of the starving and the denial of relief, while the Kazakh case was largely attributable to 'Moscow's policies of sedentarisation'. But there was in fact nothing 'special' about the brutal measures that Naimark identifies. The regime used these very same measures against starving Kazakhs. Nor was Moscow's official programme of sedentarisation an important causal factor in the Kazakh famine (a point that my colleague Niccolò Pianciola also stresses in his contribution to this forum). Rather, Moscow's sedentarisation programme languished, as Kazakhs, like Ukrainians, were subject to violent measures and debilitating food procurements that sparked famine. Only in the famine's aftermath did Kazakhs settle, a transformation forced by the destruction of their animal herds during the crisis rather than by the official sedentarisation programme itself.

Ukrainians had a historically troubled relationship with the regime, while the Kazakhs did not, a point that Pianciola discusses in greater depth in his contribution

to this forum. But on the level of policy I find there is little to distinguish the regime's brutal response to the Ukrainian case from that of the Kazakh case. Moscow may have seen the Ukrainians as more 'threatening', but I do not see this born out in any real distinction in how the two groups were treated. Kazakhs, like Ukrainians, suffered from violent assaults on their culture throughout collectivisation. Given this finding, I believe that the Kazakh case should challenge us to rethink some of the linkages we have made between state-sponsored violence against particular ethnic groups and assumptions and attitudes in the Soviet state.

In light of the broader spectrum of violence during this period, Applebaum's narrative would have benefitted from comparison with the other Soviet famines that occurred at the same time. Moscow's crimes in Ukraine appear exceptional because she frames them as such. In trying to understand Moscow's response to the flight of starving Ukrainians, it would have been helpful to reference the far more extensive flight of starving Kazakhs (ultimately, over a million Kazakhs would flee their own republic during the famine), which began several years prior to the Ukrainian case. Similarly, Applebaum's discussion of what she calls 'the slow-motion movement of Russians into a depopulated Ukraine' (291) would have been improved by reference to Kazakhstan's far more dramatic demographic transformation in the post-famine years. After the famine, Moscow's policies of migration and deportation would bring over a million new settlers to the republic. Plunged into the minority after the famine, Kazakhs would not constitute more than fifty percent of the population in their own republic until after the Soviet collapse.

To engage in such comparison is not to deny Ukrainian suffering nor to engage in a kind of competitive victimisation but to understand more precisely what made each of the collectivisation famines unique. Only through comparison can we begin to understand the range of policies the regime used to deal with the disastrous consequences of its collectivisation policies and the degree to which they pursued these policies in each case. Comparison also has clear implications for the thorny question of intentionality, one of the most contested issues in the historiography on the collectivisation famines. Famine in Kazakhstan began prior to famine in Ukraine, and, though Applebaum does not elaborate on this point, this experience must have in some way shaped the regime's approach to the Ukrainian case. In some instances, there are patterns that hint at the possible transmission of tactics: border closures, for instance, were used in Kazakhstan prior to their deployment in Ukraine. But in other cases the linkages are clear: in late 1932 Filipp Goloshchekin, Kazakhstan's party secretary, spearheaded a campaign of terror against starving Kazakhs explicitly modeled upon tactics used against starving Ukrainians in the Kuban.

To a large extent, Applebaum's narrative reflects some of the pitfalls of the historiography on the Soviet collectivisation famines. Research on the collectivisation famines has developed along national lines, with consideration of these famines entirely distinct from one another. The all-Union context of which these crises necessarily were a part has been lost. This development has also meant that the stories that do not fit neatly into national trajectories, such as that of the Volga Germans or the residents of Saratov province in the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic

(RSFSR), who also suffered disproportionately from famine, have been neglected. But Moscow did not think about these famines in total isolation from one another. Rather, the regime's responses to these crises informed one another. Grain or meat shortfalls in one part of the Soviet Union had implications for another part of the Soviet Union. To truly understand the complexities of these famines, we must situate each of them in their pan-Soviet context.