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# **The Tragedies in the Soviet Countryside of the Early 1930s: Research Frontiers and Rival Interpretations of the Famines**

In November 2018, Viktor Kondrashin, expert historian on the Soviet famine in the early 1930s, organized a workshop at the Institute for Russian History of the Academy of Sciences (IRI RAN). Contributions by Russian and Ukrainian as well as British, Irish and Swedish historians summed up their research projects concerning the famines in Russia, Kazakhstan and Ukraine in 1929–1933. They highlighted the opposing interpretations of the causes of these famine-stricken regions. They also scrutinized the recent debates in the West of Anne Applebaum’s book *Red Famine*. Motivated by this enlightening discussion, this brief offers a short overview of the history, and contemporary state, of the Soviet famine debate.

In this brief, my purpose is to describe research frontiers concerning the Soviet famine in the early 1930s, based on my participation in the workshop at the Institute of Russian History of the Academy of Sciences in November 2018. Starting with a short historiographical background, I give examples of important archival contributions. Then I present contributions by individual scholars and their interpretations, concerning the causes of the 1929–33 famines in Soviet Russia and Ukraine. The separate famine in Kazakhstan 1929–30 was caused by forced sedentarisation and disbanding of the Kazakh people’s nomadic life; it claimed a proportionally higher number of deaths but would require quite a different analysis.

The collectivization of the peasantry was enforced in 1930–31. An initial abundant harvest 1930 seemed as a success for the kolkhoz system. It appeared to supply enough food for city dwellers and industrial workers as well as Red army soldiers. It also seemed to permit a large export of grain. This, and raw material exports in general, was crucial for the Soviet Union as hard currency generators for the import of machinery from the West. The five-year plan 1928–32 had overestimated how much these export commodities would generate. During the Great Depression, terms of trade turned dramatically against the Soviet export commodities. Likewise, the Soviet leadership had not foreseen how intensively collectivization would be resisted by peasants. Not only were many farming processes neglected in the new kolkhozes. Many peasants chose to slaughter horses, rather than giving them to the kolkhozy. The production of tractors could not yet substitute the loss of draught animals by ca. 15 per cent in 1930–31.

Weather conditions worsened and resulted in lower harvests in 1931 and 1932. A severe famine was imminent. Grain exports were cut. Rationing was severed. Although grain collection quotas were lowered in 1932, the greater famine severely hit the grain-producing regions in Ukraine, but also Kuban and Lower Volga regions and Northern Caucasus. The overall Soviet population

losses by 1933 are estimated as 6–7 million, with approximately 3.5 million famine-related deaths in Ukraine.

This famine was a taboo topic in the Soviet era. The authorities managed to divert attention from the catastrophic consequences of collectivization and rapid industrialization. After World War Two numerous oral witnesses’ collections were gathered in the Ukrainian diaspora in Canada. In the late 1980s, the British historian Robert Conquest wrote his pioneering study *Harvest of Sorrow*. An accompanying TV documentary film made the general public in the West aware of the 1930s famine in the USSR.

Before that, during the “Thaw” in the early 1960s, established Russian historians had got Nikita Khrushchev’s directive to study primary sources concerning Stalin’s forced collectivization. However, their dramatic findings and frank book manuscript on the real costs of the collectivization was prohibited in 1965 by Khrushchev’s successors. Only during glasnost could these specialists, with Viktor Danilov (1925 – 2004) as one of the most visionary researchers, again analyze the agrarian history of the Soviet Union in the late 1920s and early 1930s.

Danilov’s primary concern was to make as many archival documents as possible available. He guided archivists and researchers to examine all relevant, central as well as regional, archives. Numerous documentary volumes, articles and monographs were produced, notably the 5-volume project *The Tragedy of the Soviet Countryside*, which showed both the excesses of the forced collectivization in 1930-33, and the famine conditions all over the USSR. Danilov also cooperated with other archivists to compile a documentary of how the secret police’s local officers in the countryside – often more accurately and frankly the communist party organs – did indeed describe the real situation in the villages. This project *The Soviet Countryside as seen by VChK-OGPU-NKVD* covers the whole interwar period 1918–39, and added unexpected perspectives on the dramatic period. In particular, it proves –



contrary to what is sometimes believed – that Stalin and the leadership were very well informed of the dire situation that resulted from their policy decisions (see Samuelson 2007).

Today, we have not only oral history – eye-witnesses and relatives of the famine victims – but also a sufficiently reliable source base to describe all aspects of the transformation in the countryside. What remains however, is to set all this new empirical material into its context and to explain what caused the famine years 1929–1933? Which were its specific traits in different parts of the Soviet Union?

A most authoritative Russian expert on these topics is Viktor Kondrashin. He has continued the projects started by Danilov and published several archival documentary collections. The first is *Famine in the USSR 1930 – 1934* with almost 200 facsimile archival documents. A larger archival publication by Kondrashin in four volumes (2011–13) expands the empirical basis for researchers. Of particular interest are those on the famine in various parts of the USSR. Kondrashin's recent monograph *The 1932-1933 Famine: The Tragedy of the Russian Countryside* (2018) outlines his interpretation that the grand famine was the unexpected result of the collectivization. It struck in many regions of the Russian republic. It was not directed specifically against any ethnic group. Grain collection from the kolkhozes in 1931 and 1932 was brutally enforced. The Soviet leadership lacked information in 1932 concerning the real harvest. Only when the famine grew catastrophic in the winter of 1932/33, did the authorities change their policies: lowered grain requisition quotas, sent seed grain back to many regions, tried to evacuate suffering children from famine-struck regions. In short, that millions of people in Soviet Ukraine as well as in Russia died during the famine years was an unforeseen effect of a policy. In other words, it was not an intentional, genocidal policy directed towards the Ukrainian or any other people but a tragedy for all the peoples of the USSR.

In the West, major research on Soviet agriculture was done by Robert Davies and Stephen Wheatcroft. Their monograph *The Years of Hunger* (2004) is translated into Russian. It provides empirical data on all agricultural branches. Their conclusion is that “the Soviet leadership was struggling with a famine crisis which had been caused by their wrongheaded policies, but was unexpected and undesirable”. Davies and Wheatcroft emphasize that the changing policies in 1932/33 (lowering of grain collection, redistribution back to the peasant and shelter for famine-stricken youngsters) indicate that there was not any intention to “apply famine as a terror-weapon” as Conquest and many Ukrainian historians have stated. Stalin and other leaders made concessions to Ukraine in procurements, and were clearly trying to balance the subsistence needs of Ukraine and other regions. They cut down grain exports in 1932 to a minimum. But they did not acknowledge the famine to the West, asking for relief as Lenin had done in 1921–22, for fear of losing further in credibility worth. Also important to consider is that the Soviet leadership was particularly worried over a possible further Japanese expansion towards the Soviet Far East, after the takeover of Manchuria in 1931–32. This factor precluded any more use of the state reserves of grain (for the armed forces in case of war), to alleviate the situation in the starving areas.

Since the late 1990s, the Ukrainian historians have made different interpretations. The general famine all over the USSR is acknowledged as a consequence of Stalin's policy. The climate as well as crop diseases led to shrinking harvests in 1931 and 1932. However, the famine that struck Ukraine in 1932/33 was essentially different. It is called *Holodomor* from *holod* – famine and *morit'* – to kill. This interpretation presumes a genocidal intention of the Soviet leadership against the Ukrainian people, and its peasantry in particular. Since 2006, this interpretation is state law in the Ukraine and stresses that Holodomor was deliberately planned and executed by the Soviet regime in order to systematically destroy the



Ukrainian people's aspirations for a free and independent Ukraine, and subsequently caused the death of millions of Ukrainians in 1932 and 1933. The Ukrainian Rada adopted the law *Pro Golodomor 1932 – 1933 rokiv v Ukraïni* (Закон України: Про Голодомор 1932–1933 років в Україні) on 28 November 2006, which consequently set out the exact juridical terms that give the established framework for historiography in the Ukraine.

It is testimony of the high standards in the Russian academic tradition that Kondrashin invited the prominent Ukrainian historian Stanislav Kulchitskii and the Canadian-based Roman Serbyn, and others from Ukraine, to contribute to the anthology *The Contemporary Russian-Ukrainian Historiography on the Famine 1932 – 1933 in the USSR*. Here the reader himself can study and compare their argumentation for the Holodomor-interpretation. They present a different set of empirical data from each theme in this ongoing debate, concerning both agricultural and demographic figures, as well as the Soviet Communist party's decisions versus Ukraine in late 1932 – early 1933.

The decisive question accordingly remains which of the rival interpretations is most solidly confirmed by traditional methods on history as science. In other words, whether there was an intention from Stalin, from central and/or regional leaders, to cause or to aggravate – as a terror-instrument – the famine in the Ukraine. In addition, it remains to be decided whether or not the concept of genocide, as defined in the 1948 United Nations Convention, is applicable to the famine in the Ukraine and other parts of the Soviet Union. The genocide interpretation is rooted in an academic tradition that stretches from Conquest's above-mentioned *Harvest of Sorrow* to more recent works, such as by Timothy Snyder *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin*, Norman Naimark *Stalin's Genocides* and numerous articles by Andrea Graziosi among other historians in the West.

Mention should finally be done of Anne Applebaum's *Red Famine: Stalin's War on Ukraine* (2017) as a most detailed and vivid description of the sufferings of the Ukraine people in the early 1930s. Her book was very positively reviewed not only in the mass media, but also by academic scholars like Sheila Fitzpatrick. However, Fitzpatrick had obviously misread the book and praised it for its refutation of the genocide interpretation. This forced Applebaum to clarify that precisely the opposite was her case: The famine in the Ukraine was intentional and foreseeable by the Soviet leadership, whose intention it was to subdue nationalist aspirations. In turn, this rejoinder forced Fitzpatrick in a commentary to withdraw all her praise for the book!

Given this hot debate, it is not surprising that, in the academic community, it was felt that matters could not be put to rest without thorough arguments. The editors of *Contemporary European History* organized a solid roundtable on Soviet famines, with written essays by leading historians and specialists (Volume 27, Issue 3, August 2018, pp. 432-434). These concise essays, by N. Naimark, N. Pianciola, T. Penter, J.A. Getty, A. Graziosi, S. Wheatcroft and others may serve as the best introduction to a thorny historical theme that can otherwise be difficult to grasp, not least because of the often politicized nature of the debates.

The autumn 2018 seminar at IRI RAN in Moscow was one in a long row of similar events – conferences and workshops on the history of the collectivization of the peasantry, the dekulakization and repressions against peasant protests, and the famines in various Soviet republics in 1929 – 1934. Already in spring 2004, a landmark conference took place at IRI RAN, where Viktor Danilov and Stanislav Kulchitskii, as representatives of the Russian vs. the Ukrainian perspective, debated for a whole day (!), albeit without converging viewpoints. At that stage, they could sum up a decade of archival research and chisel out divergent points for further research. Over the last fifteen years, scholars in



both countries have made great strides to deepen the empirical foundation, notably by detailed mapping of the harvests, demographic changes and other indicators even at the local level. This new level of knowledge was well reflected in the various contributions at the seminar and in the above-mentioned anthology *Contemporary Russian-Ukrainian Historiography*.

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Samuelson's research in Russian economic history re-started when the archives opened in 1992. His major research topic is the development of the Soviet military-industrial complex of the 1930s and onwards. He has participated in several research projects on Soviet agrarian history of the 1930s, on the Great Terror 1937-38 and the Gulag camp system, and also on Sweden's relations with the Soviet Union in the Cold War period. Several institutions have rewarded his research results. The Royal Swedish Academy of Letters, History and Antiquities rewarded its prestigious Rettig Prize in 2014 to Samuelson for his fundamental research and innovative grasp of the Russian archival materials. On 4 November 2014, he was awarded Orden Druzhby (the Friendship Order) by President Vladimir Putin at the National Day ceremony in the Kremlin.

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