
The National and the Social in Stalin's Political Famines

Roundtable on Soviet Famines

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Ten or more years ago I informally proposed to a friend sitting in the editorial board of a major historical journal to organise a forum on Soviet famines in the light of the new sources and interpretations that were emerging. The answer I received struck me: it was a good idea and the topic was indeed important, but times weren't yet ripe. At first I was reminded of what Mikhail Suslov supposedly told Vasily Grossman: people weren't yet ready for *Life and Destiny*, whose essential 'truth' he did not therefore question. Then, I came to the conclusion that the answer was in itself a sign of the relevance of the topic and of its potential impact upon our reading of the past century. In fact, as I will try to briefly show in my conclusions, *within* Soviet famines keys can be found that open doors to an array of new, conceptual questions which force us to reconsider many of our basic ideas and representations. This is for historians a fascinating opportunity, but it can also prove a harrowing personal experience, so that in a way my colleague – being unquestionably wrong – was also unquestionably right: big questions have their times, and we can 'force' these times only up to a point, and at a risk, as is often the case with 'forcing'.

I was therefore happy when *Contemporary European History's* editors contacted me. It meant that, as this roundtable proves, times for a serious scientific discussion were eventually getting ripe, even though – as some contributions indicate – past difficulties and tensions, often deriving from deeply held ideological and emotional convictions, themselves the product of twentieth century history, are still there. Given the topic's 'heat', I decided to follow a 'cold' approach and proceeded by flatly answering the editors' questions, leaving some personal remarks to the conclusions.

A final warning: the reader should know that Anne Applebaum thanks me in the introduction to her book.

New Sources

Crucial new sources started to appear in the mid-1990s, when one still had to rely on diplomatic reports, memoirs and testimonies. Viktor P. Danilov's Joint State Political

Directorate (*Obyedinyonnoye gosudarstvennoye politicheskoye upravleniye pri SNK SSSR*; OGPU) documents, Terry Martin's explorations of the national question in Soviet archives, Oleg Khlevniuk's edition of the Stalin–Kaganovich correspondence and Ukrainian documentary collections such as those prepared by Stanislav Kul'chyts'kyi and Yuri Shapoval changed the landscape and allowed new interpretations to emerge already by the end of that decade.

Later on, studies on the national and linguistic repression in 1933–4 Ukraine and most recently the analysis of demographic data opened yet more new vistas. For instance, the discovery that in Ukraine the 1933 famine hit harder in areas less important for grain production (Kyiv and Charkiv) than for their political significance shows that the thesis according to which the 1932–3 *Holodomor* was merely the consequence of Ukraine's importance as a bread basket is in need of readjustment. As to Kazakhstan, the now ascertained cause of the famine – that is, Moscow's decision to seize Kazakh herds to provide Slavic cities with meat, again on the basis of political considerations – gave new meaning to the interpretations of the Soviet experience as a colonial one.

Above all, these sources, as well as the connections scholars established between the two main acts of the Soviet anti-peasant war, 1918–22 and 1928–33, divided by the new economic policy (NEP) intermission, made clear the link between the social and the national, first and foremost – but not solely – in the mind of Stalin, whose nationalist youth must be given its due. The decision in 1929 not to discontinue the 'indigenisation' (*korenizatsiia*) policies has been convincingly tied to Stalin's fear of resurrecting the ghosts of 1919, when the villages' national and social resentment against requisitions and the debasing of the Ukrainian language and culture combined in fueling a great and successful anti-Bolshevik revolt. The reversal of the 1929 choice in Ukraine, in the Kuban and partially in Belorussia in late 1932 – when indigenisation policies were accused of feeding nationalism – came in a decree on the hardening of grain collections, which thus joined the social and the national in the attempt to break both the Ukrainian countryside and Ukrainian national communism.

This measure was soon followed by anti-national and anti-Ukrainian policies in the cities. Applebaum is therefore right in stressing a connection between the social and the national that was unquestionably there, and that Stalin pursued with determination, riding it to a triumph that the Party celebrated in the 1934 'Congress of Victors'. One may add that sources point to the importance of the national factor also in the Northern Caucasus and in the Volga German Republic (Volga Germans, upon whom little research has been done, suffered disproportionately).

Albeit indirectly, Ukrainian Jewish communities, Shtetls in particular, were also heavily hit. These communities, whose traditional way of life had been already undermined by civil war pogroms and by the emigration to Russian cities made possible by the Bolsheviks' cancellation of Tsarist discriminations, suffered from the anti-NEP (that is, anti-trade and anti-craftsmen) and anti-religious measures of the late 1920s. They were then again seriously affected by the starving of the Ukrainian peasants and villages, which destroyed the foundation of the difficult, but symbiotic relationship Shtetls had traditionally lived off, at the very moment in which

Moscow's decision to 'reform' rationing deprived small urban centre's inhabitants of state support. Hunger thus devastated the Shtetls, too, even though some of their inhabitants could rely upon aid from relatives abroad.

Popular Participation in the Soviet System

To apply the concept of 'popular participation' to the Stalinist regime of the 1930s seems misguided. There was such a participation – albeit always uneasy – during the NEP years, both after the initial stages of the war and more fully (but certainly not for 'punished peoples') after the 1945 victory. In the 1930s, however, the state waged a war against peasants and nomads, which constituted 75–80 per cent of the population. City dwellers too, however, especially but not solely in minor centres, also suffered greatly; many of them were recently urbanised peasants, fully aware of rural events, and even privileged heavy industry workers in large urban centres saw their real wages drop to less than half of what they had been in 1927.

This is not to say that Stalin could not rely, even in 1932–3, on some measure of support, primarily in the crucial repressive bureaucracies and in the party apparatus (In 1932, however, the latter also wavered, as shown by Stalin's decision to submit it to OGPU control). Among these supporters there were central and local agents who might indeed be termed 'perpetrators', whose motives varied from ideological beliefs and personal exaltation (especially present among younger militants) to self-interest (some even kept harems thanks to control over food), fear, opportunism, personal cruelty and so on.

Ideology's role should not, therefore, be overestimated. Yet, it was unquestionably there, especially but not solely in leaders' minds. Whatever the interpretation we give to those famines, of dekulakisation, of the subsequent Terror etc., they were the product not of choices made in terms, or in the name of one 'people' against another, but rather the result of policies devised by men who believed in socialism, and anyway 'reasoned' in terms of this specific ideology. It was never a question of Russia versus Ukraine or Kazakhstan but of building communism by annihilating the opposition of 'reactionary' peasants and 'reactionary' peoples (not a new concept for Marxist thinkers: Marx and Engels employed it in 1848–49), which up to the 1930s could include the Russian one, as indicated by the drastic suppression of large segments of the Russian intelligentsia and especially of the Russian Orthodox Church, which by 1939 had almost disappeared (an event that, according to Lemkin, does fit the 'genocide' category).

The *Holodomor* and the Soviet Famines

I cannot comment on 'popular narratives'. Certainly, the correct way to approach the 1931–4 events is to analyse them in terms of different famines within a general, pan-Soviet 'times of scarcity', caused by collectivisation – in other words by political

choices taken in the name of building socialism and destroying traditional rural society and at replacing it with something of a different nature.

These different famines varied in their causes, chronology, mortality rates, geography and consequences. Relatively speaking, the Kazakh tragedy, the direct product of state action, was the most murderous one: it ran from 1931 to 1933, uprooted the traditional Kazakh society and bore a clear colonial footprint (Kazakhs died because Moscow took away their resources to feed the Slavic urban dwellers it politically feared). The specific Ukrainian one, which started in late 1932, had an evident connection with national considerations, and not only in the mind of Stalin. It is impossible to fully grasp its meaning if one doesn't take into account also the parallel policies which aimed at political, cultural and linguistic 'de-Ukrainianisation'. The Kuban famine can be fruitfully related to it. The famines in Northern Caucasus and in the Volga also had their specificities, and as I stated above one should also study the impact of hunger upon other national groups, such as the Volga Germans or the Ukrainian Jews.

More generally, throughout the Soviet Union, large cities and important industrial centres were spared the famine horrors (yet suffered from hunger); their immediate surroundings suffered less than villages and small towns situated beyond 100 kilometers from them, and so did border areas. This means that Moscow directly managed, through rationing (as Elena Osokina proved), social and national suffering and death.

Obviously, the above mentioned differences call for a comparative approach that has recently been extended to socialist famines in different countries, including China, by scholars such as Lucien Bianco, Felix Wemheuer and myself.

Genocide

Genocide is a legal concept which poses serious problems to historians facing a reality which but rarely presents them with well-defined, binary options but rather with variants sharing important traits but moving along a continuum from extreme to 'moderate'.

Personally, I thus have difficulty with interpretations based on a yes or no category. Certainly, the Soviet Union of the 1930s and the 1940s (as well as of the civil war period) represents a crucial site of the modern genocidal experience. National, religious and social (in the widest sense of the term) groups were collectively targeted for partial extermination and 'breaking' – physical as well as cultural – on the basis of 'categories' the centre elaborated building upon: a) the Socialist transformative project; b) the Marxist tradition of reasoning along group and not individual lines; c) state behavior in time of stress and crisis, when apparent or real security concerns and political priorities direct population policies. What we have learned about the mechanisms behind the 1937–8 Terror, whose secret decrees determined the groups to be annihilated precisely on the basis of a social, political and national categorisation of the Soviet population, fully confirms the point.

The Ukrainian 1932–4 case is of great interest because there Stalin consciously combined the social and the national, and used a theory that identified in peasants and intellectuals the springs of national movements, to experiment with national *un-building* on a ‘subject’, Ukraine, to which nation building techniques based on the same premises had just been applied with success.

I thus appreciated Anne Applebaum’s choice to stress the interaction between the social and the national, as I value her long-term approach. It is in fact difficult, if not impossible, to understand what happened in 1932–4 Ukraine without taking into considerations the previous fifteen to twenty years. And while I respect Sheila Fitzpatrick’s new approach to the Soviet famines, I believe that – as other scholars do – she underestimates the *Holodomor*’s peculiarities precisely because of her long-standing intellectual penchant for opposing the social and the national, with a strong stress on the former. However, especially in mixed and/or alien-ruled territories, any analysis should start from an interpenetration between these two factors, often complicated by the religious element.

I also find it misguided to ask whether the ‘famine’ (which famine?) was the result of mismanagement and failure of collectivisation or of a conscious plan. This means going back to confusing the general Soviet ‘time of scarcity’ of 1931–4, certainly a product of the former, with specific famines, such as the *Holodomor* and the Kazakh tragedy, which were the result of political and economic choices. And I find it problematic to ask whether Ukrainian peasants died because they were Ukrainians or because they were peasants. They died *in such numbers because they were both*, and with them died more than a few members of other nationalities, such as Shtetl Jews, also because – as the story of the 1937–8 Terror indicates – no ‘category-based mass operation’ can be precise, and ‘when woods are cut, chips fly’, as Stalin apparently loved to say.

Above all, I found it plain wrong to read the story of the 1930s as a story of Russia versus Ukraine, Kazakhstan or the Volga Germans. Yes, decisions were taken in Moscow, but 1932–3 Moscow was ruled by a socialist despot still surrounded – and, in spite of everything, still supported – by the leaders of the revolution and of the civil war, who one can accuse of anything, but not of Russian nationalism. Russians too, by the way, were suffering, even though Kazakhs and Ukrainians paid a much higher price because of by now well-known reasons.

The National and the Social

The Soviet famines force us to change our approach to, and conception of, the twentieth century, and not just of the European one. Soviet history cannot, of course, be reduced to them. For seventy and more years, millions of people lived lives not affected by them, even though this is certainly not the case with Kazakhstan, Ukraine, the Northern Caucasus and the Volga German Republic, liquidated in 1941. But given the Soviet experience’s centrality in both the history of, and the discourse over, the past century, to discover that it also was an exemplary locus of genocidal

practices cannot but have profound consequences, consequences that have not yet fully manifested themselves even in the scholarly community.

Just to mention a few examples, this discovery calls for the full integration of Soviet history in to the field of genocide studies as well in to the history of the imperial/colonial experience and legacy. Both roads have been taken already, but much remains to be done, and the inclusion of the Soviet experience will deeply affect both fields, as well as Soviet historians and their relatively 'autarchic' conceptual toolbox. A full awareness of the 1930–3 crisis, and of the reality of life in the Soviet Union during those years, also raises important questions about the nature and meaning of the 'totalitarianism' category, and on its applicability to pre-Second World War Soviet history. The Ukrainian 1932–4 case is of great interest because Stalin consciously combined there the social and the national in a theory that identified in peasants and intellectuals/culture the springs of national movements.

Finally, Stalin's rational and successful, if murderous, manipulation of both nation building and un-building, and his capacity to utilise at the same time social and national (cultural) categories, calls for a fresh look at our interpretation of 'nationalism' and of nation building (and un-building) processes. In particular it stresses the necessity not to resort to binary, oppositional schemes as far as the 'social' and the 'national' are concerned. Though such opposition did exist, in most cases, and not just in borderlands and mixed territories, the two elements often interpenetrated themselves, producing a gamut of hybrids and variations that are essential to the understanding of twentieth century history.