

Red Famine: Stalin's War on Ukraine

by Anne Applebaum – review

A heartbreaking history of hunger, says Simon Sebag Montefiore



Horror to come: Ukrainian workers in the early 1930s *H S Pshenychnoho*

The starvation of a human body once it begins always follows the same course,” writes Anne Applebaum in this magisterial and heartbreaking history of Stalin’s Ukrainian famine. “In the first phase the body consumes its stores of glucose. Feelings of extreme hunger set in... In the second phase, which can last several weeks, the body begins to consume its own fats and the organism weakens drastically. In the third phase, the body devours its own proteins, cannibalising tissues and muscles. Eventually the skin becomes thin, the eyes distended, the legs and belly swollen as extreme imbalances lead the body to retain water...” And finally, in the last days, a brutal careless pitilessness, a near madness, hallucinations and a total apathy lead to death.

In late 1932 to early 1933 a terrible famine struck Ukraine and other parts of the Soviet Union, the Volga, North Caucasus and Kazakhstan, killing around five million in total, but the great mass of these people, approximately 3.9 million, died in Ukraine. It is well known that this was not a coincidence. Stalin's brutal policy of collectivisation and repression caused, then intensified, the hunger. Émigré organisations coined a new word to describe it: "holodomor" — a combination of "holod", meaning hunger, and "mor", extermination.

Applebaum recounts the special place of Ukraine. From the rise of the Romanov dynasty it was regarded as essential to the Russian Empire, just as Putin regards it today. Throughout the 17th and 18th centuries the tsars gradually seized this territory from the Ottoman padishahs, Polish kings and the hetmans of the Cossacks.

But during the savage civil war following the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, a succession of Ukrainian warlords and regimes resisted Lenin's armies. So did the peasantry in the empire as a whole. As Lenin suspected, the peasants were essentially conservative and anti-Communist. They wanted food and land but he was determined that Ukraine should stay in his new Soviet Union.

In the 1920s Stalin allowed a policy of "Ukrainisation", backing limited retention of its national culture in return for loyalty. When he swerved Leftwards in 1927-8 — in one of history's most colossal gambles — he forced peasants into collective farms, simultaneously seizing grain to feed his more loyal cities and to sell abroad to fund his radical industrialisation campaign.

The peasants responded by killing their livestock and hiding grain, which Stalin regarded as rebellion. As harvests swung between satisfactory and disastrous, Stalin despatched thuggish urban activists and regiments of the OGPU secret police, under his brutish lieutenants such as Kaganovich, to use force to find any hidden grain.

Peasants started to starve. Even Ukrainian Bolsheviks begged for some relief, but Stalin blamed the famine on its victims and promulgated draconian measures: anyone stealing a husk could be shot.

The Great Famine of 1932-33 was not so much caused by collectivisation directly. "Starvation was the result of the forcible removal of food from peoples' home; roadblocks that prevented peasants seeing work or food; blacklists imposed on farms and villages," Applebaum writes.

The chapter on starvation makes searing reading. People killed their children and ate them; cats and rats became extinct; whole villages perished. Carts that collected the dead simply started to collect the weak and buried them alive. In one report the secret police boss of Kiev reported 69 cases of cannibalism in two months.

But as many historians have pointed out, this was not unique to Ukraine: it was a Soviet famine too. In their private letters in the Russian State Archive of Socio-

Political History (RGASPI), the leaders talked of “breaking the back of the peasantry” and that applied to Siberia, to North Caucasus and Volga, and to the destruction of half the Kazakh population of nomads. Stalin himself was almost proud of this, boasting to Churchill that 10 million died in the struggle against the “kulaks”.

Ultimately the famine achieved the exact opposite of Stalin’s purpose. As Russia seeks to control Ukraine today, the famine partially denied by Russian historians has become part of the Ukrainian experience and national narrative. “Stalin did not seek to kill all Ukrainians,” concludes Applebaum, “but physically eliminated the most active and engaged.” Stalin’s 1937 census revealed that eight million people had vanished from the USSR. Stalin simply hid the figures — and shot the statisticians.

Simon Sebag Montefiore is the author of Stalin and The Romanovs; his latest novel is Red Sky at Noon