

DONALD RAYFIELD

**Emptying the Bread Basket**  
**Red Famine: Stalin's War on Ukraine**  
*By Anne Applebaum*

My landlord in the early 1960s, a Mr Nikolysyn, was a survivor of the Holodomor ('killing by hunger'), the famine that Stalin's policy of collectivisation and grain requisition inflicted on Ukraine, leading to the death from starvation of at least five million peasants and the imprisonment of millions of resisters in the Gulag. But Mr Nikolysyn didn't blame Stalin or even the Russians: he identified his oppressors as communist Jews avenging the pogroms. When the Nazis invaded, he, like many Ukrainians, happily joined the SS to exact revenge. He was a kindly man, tolerating my pet hare stripping his wallpaper while he read his copy of the newspaper for Ukrainian SS veterans that circulated freely in Britain then, but he was as traumatised as all the survivors of the Holodomor.

Until recently, historians ignored the Ukrainian famine of 1932–3. Accounts compiled in the 1950s by Ukrainians living in Canada were discounted as nationalist propaganda, even though a few Western journalists, such as Gareth Jones, Malcolm Muggeridge and the Austrian communist Nikolaus Basseches, had at the time of the famine printed reports of a catastrophe in the Ukrainian countryside. It was Robert Conquest's *The Harvest of Sorrow* (1986) that, despite the closure of Soviet archives to researchers, first gave plausible estimates of the number of casualties. In 1988 the Commission on the Ukrainian Famine reported to the US Congress: 'Joseph Stalin and those around him committed genocide against Ukrainians in 1932–1933.' Since then the famine has generally been recognised as a horror equal to the Great Terror to which Stalin subjected the urban population.

The 1990s, the decade in which Russian (and Ukrainian) archives spilled out documents, saw the publication of *The Tragedy of the Soviet Countryside*, four volumes of official and eyewitness reports and even letters from dying peasants (until the mid-1930s Soviet post offices still accepted letters sent by Ukrainians to émigré relatives – presumably because the replies brought hard currency that the authorities could confiscate). The release of archival material was followed by the publication of moving accounts written by survivors and the despicable correspondence between Stalin and his henchmen, particularly Kaganovich and Molotov, who were clearly aware of every aspect of what they were doing, except for the stupidity of the enterprise, which was to attempt to sell the peasants' grain for foreign machinery and turn the dispossessed peasants into industrial helots.

Genocides usually have their own logic: to get rid of surplus populations that cannot be deported; to take over aboriginal land for immigrant cultivation; to unite a nation by scapegoating a particular class, race or religion. Stalin's logic, however, is

unfathomable. In the early 1930s, grain fetched too low a price for the purchase of the latest technology. Far more logical, perhaps, was slave labour in the Gulag, producing gold, nickel and diamonds to pay for American machinery. In any case, the confiscation of food was inefficient: piles of grain rotted in open fields before it could be shipped to the docks; emaciated peasants lacked the strength to build steelworks in the Urals. The only clear motives for what was perpetrated were hatred of Ukraine and the peasants, and the search for a pretext to purge any Party official prepared to stand up to Stalin's orders. Ukraine had fought for independence during the Civil War; while generally sympathetic to socialism, its peasantry wanted to hang on to individual ownership of land. Stalin had, in fact, good reason to fear Ukraine, because of the sympathy much of its population had with Poland. Poland under Józef Piłsudski was a formidable enemy of Soviet communism and energetically supported émigrés, Ukrainian or Georgian, willing to resist it. The head of OGPU (the secret police), Vyacheslav Menzhinsky, like Lenin and Trotsky, despised the peasantry even more than he hated the bourgeoisie: as a law student, Menzhinsky had in 1898 written a dissertation denouncing the Russian peasantry as 'one of the major brakes on Russia's agricultural development'.

Anne Applebaum has written an exhaustive, authoritative and eloquent book. She deals with questions that have hitherto lacked unequivocal answers. First, what basis in the past did the famine of 1932–3 have? Second, in what ways was Ukraine singled out? Third, does the term 'genocide' apply to the famine? Taking the first question, Applebaum traces the continuum of suffering and fear that began in 1918 during the Civil War, as armies raged across Ukraine, each taking its toll on the peasantry. The terrible famine of 1921–2 on the Volga (which affected more Russians than Ukrainians) might have killed as many as the famine in 1932–3 had it not been alleviated by international (largely American) relief agencies. Even with the advent of the New Economic Policy of the 1920s, the peasantry never felt quite secure; by 1927 requisitions were turning the first shortages into hunger and fear. In 1929–30 collectivisation provoked peasant rebellions (often violent enough to lead to the capture of whole towns). The authorities in turn escalated the violence, sending army units to join OGPU agents. Ukrainian communist officials who balked at the confiscation of anything edible, including seed corn, were replaced or purged. By 1932 there was no prospect of relief. The year 1934 was 'better' only because there were millions fewer mouths to feed. How many millions fewer is hard to establish: the increase in infant mortality and the numbers of the 'unborn' are unquantifiable.

The question of whether Ukraine was deliberately targeted is complex. There were contradictions: for instance, in the Kuban, the wheat lands between the River Don and the foothills of the Caucasus, Ukrainian peasants were singled out for survival, while their Cossack neighbours were deported or burned to death in locked buildings. Along the lower Volga, Russian and Ukrainian peasants suffered alike. Elsewhere in the USSR the famine may have been worse than in Ukraine, but the records are scanty. Kazakh nomads died more quickly once their animals had been slaughtered than peasants who could for a while eat grass, roots and dead horses, then human corpses and their children. While this was going on, Stalin imported wheat from Canada via Vladivostok to save peasants (both Russian and Ukrainian) in Siberia.

Applebaum links the atrocious killing in Ukraine to a general suspicion of Ukrainian nationalism. Within the USSR as a whole, minority languages were often preserved. Although any talented intellectual might be shot for 'bourgeois nationalist sentiments', official doctrine stated that every ethnic group should have a culture, 'national in form' if 'socialist in content', meaning that an alphabet would be devised, elementary Marxist texts would be translated into the local language, folklore would be collected and the language would be taught in primary schools. Minority languages of the kind that might have died out in the USA, Australia or Brazil were given a lifeline in the USSR. But not Ukrainian. In the 1930s, its use, hitherto encouraged, was suppressed in cities such as Kharkiv or Odessa, where Russian overwhelmed Ukrainian in administration and culture. As in tsarist times, the Ukrainian language's very existence was questioned. Ukrainian was vulnerable because Russian and Ukrainian are more or less mutually intelligible and because Ukrainian had previously taken on different literary forms in Polish, Austro-Hungarian, Czechoslovak and Russian areas, and consequently lacked unity. Many a Russian novel has dialogue in which Ukrainian speakers are treated as congenital Mrs Malaprops. Thus, Ukrainians, unlike Uzbeks or Georgians, can rightly complain of cultural genocide.

Applebaum bravely deals with the third question, that of genocide, by rejecting it. Stalin's crime against humanity had as collateral damage the extermination of a substantial number of Ukrainians. The term 'genocide' was devised in 1944 specifically to define Hitler's murder of the Jews, but since then has been used more broadly. Some Irish historians define the Irish potato famine of 1842–5 as genocidal: British callousness towards the Irish peasantry – banning the importation of corn, while exporting Irish meat and butter – may not have been intended to kill a million peasants, but the consequences should have been foreseen and prevented. Likewise, Bengali historians define the deaths of two million Bengalis from starvation and disease as genocide, because the British must have known that confiscating rice and destroying all means of transporting food were lethal. But genocide, if it is to retain its distinctive meaning, requires a primary intention. The German murder of the Herero, the British extermination of the Tasmanians and Hitler's killing of eastern Europe's Jews rank as genocide. The Holodomor (like the even worse famine in China in the 1960s that Mao allowed to happen) was a crime against humanity.

Applebaum rounds off her well-written book on an important note. The Holodomor has become a totemic symbol in Ukrainian nation-building efforts; Russian oppression has consolidated a nation once internally divided by dialect, political culture and religion. For the first time in history, Ukraine (however corrupt and impoverished) seems a viable state.