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# The Turn Away from Economic Explanations for Soviet Famines

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## Roundtable on Soviet Famines

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Anne Appelbaum's work is a very readable and accessible story about the famine. In her own words, her objective was to tell 'what actually happened. . . . What chain of events, and what mentality, led to the famine? Who was responsible?' (xv). Right from the beginning she indicates that she thinks that the famine was the result of someone's mentality, and that her objective is to find who should be blamed for it. Her's is a very simple story. It conforms to an increasingly popular trend in Soviet history to ignore or oversimplify complex economic explanations and to reduce everything to moral judgements.

The food problems that were explained by Alec Nove, Moshe Lewin, E.H. Carr and R.W. Davies, and which most specialists used to think were responsible for creating the circumstances in which extreme policies were formulated from 1927 to 1933, are largely ignored or misunderstood by Appelbaum and by many of the current generation of specialists, who see no role for economic history. But the idea that it was someone's mentality that caused the problem is not a new idea. It became popular under Khrushchev in the form of the denunciation of the cult of the individual, and it has been used ever since to provide a scapegoat and to avoid looking at the complexity of the problem.

Appelbaum and those most firmly invested in the cultural turn have been more interested in trying to understand the feelings and emotions of those people who experienced the tragedy of the famine than in trying to understand the complex food problems of the time or in providing a critical social scientific explanation of what happened. When Appelbaum writes that 'such an extraordinary catastrophe required an extraordinary justification' (209), she is unconsciously echoing the feelings of the victims of this tragedy. They wanted a justification that they could both understand and identify with. It is easier to understand and accept a tragedy caused by an identifiable villain than to understand a complex problem in which impersonal factors are at play, and in which deaths are to some extent accidental or were the collateral damage of another process altogether. Survivors of major catastrophes can certainly provide the best accounts of what it felt like to experience the catastrophe, but they

do not necessarily provide the best explanations of the causes and the consequences of these catastrophes. Victimhood does not necessarily result in improved understanding.

At a time when the government denied that a famine existed, when there was no access to archival materials and when only censored reports were available, eyewitness accounts were of particular importance. But even in the 1930s there were sufficient uncensored accounts of the famine to indicate the complex nature of the agricultural crisis. The reports of Andrew Cairns and Otto Schiller were particularly important. In addition, the results of the 1939 census showed clear signs of a major demographic crisis with the population in 1939 16 million lower than planned. In 1949 the demographer Frank Lorimer identified a population loss of 4 to 6 million that he thought was caused by the famine. The official revision of Soviet grain production data in the 1950s, immediately after Stalin's death, provided another indication that there had been a major agricultural crisis which had been concealed at the time. Even in the Soviet Union it was officially admitted that contrary to the official claims of a 30 per cent growth in grain production from the mid 1920s to the early 1950s there had been no growth at all. All these materials were available to allow a relatively reliable explanation of the overall economic causes of the famine and its scale to be drawn up in the 1970s. (See Melgrosh [www.melgrosh.unimelb.edu.au](http://www.melgrosh.unimelb.edu.au), especially the sections demography and famine). Despite this, the works of Mace and Conquest in the early 1980s generally ignored or underestimated the importance of the crisis in grain supplies of these years. Conquest mentioned the food crisis but claimed that it could easily have been resolved.

With the opening up of the Soviet archives in the mid 1980s, the number of sources of data available on the grain crisis were totally transformed. Professor Danilov and his former students Elena Tyurina and Viktor Kondrashin ensured that many of these materials were published in the major archival series *The Tragedy of the Soviet Village, 1927–39*, in five volumes (1999–2006), *The Soviet Village in the Eyes of VChK-OGPU-NKVD*, in four volumes (1996–2012) and *Famine in the USSR 1929–34*, in three volumes (2011–13). Reliable demographic data also became available in the archives, including data from the 1937 and 1939 censuses. This enabled more detailed estimates than those of Lorimer to be constructed. I have found that the most reasonable estimates of mortality rates caused by the famine in Ukraine (based on these new data sources analysed by myself, Davies, Vallin et al) place the figure around 3.5 million. Attempts to claim the largest genocide in the world with 7 to 10 million victims are hard to justify. Appelbaum's claim that 'the Ukrainian scholarly community is now coalescing, with some exceptions, around [Wolowy's] number just below 4 million deaths' would be good, if it were true, but her qualification 'it is still possible to hear numbers as high as ten million deaths' (360) seems to indicate that some diehards are finding it difficult to move closer to a realistic assessment. Using a team of Ukrainian demographers may make this move more palatable to Ukrainian nationalists, but I see no reason why academe in general should move away from 3.5 million.

As regards the grain problem, the archival data published in *TSD, Golod v SSSR 1929–34* and in *Kak Lomaly NEP* all provide confirmation of the views of Lewin, Carr, Davies and their colleagues of the central importance of the grain problem in

the economic and political decisions of the time. Davies and I have (2004) produced the most detailed account of the grain crisis in these years, showing the uncertainties in the data and the mistakes carried out by a generally ill-informed, and excessively ambitious, government. The state showed no signs of a conscious attempt to kill lots of Ukrainians and belated attempts that sought to provide relief when it eventually saw the tragedy unfolding were evident. The relief measures that were given were of course too few and too late to make much difference and they were also given in secret with most concern over covering up the catastrophe that had occurred.

Throughout the early 1930s there was great uncertainty over the level of grain production, as there had been since the First World War. The level of grain production that was officially accepted in the late 1920s and in 1931 and 1932 was already greatly exaggerated, when an attempt was made to objectify harvest evaluation by switching to a system of sample measurements. This produced the so called 'biological yield' of grain, which was measured 'on the stalk', prior to harvest losses. Harvest losses were normally about 20 to 30 per cent of the crop, but in 1932 they were probably much higher. These harvest losses had to be deducted from the 'biological yield' to produce the 'barn yield', or the amount of grain available for use. In 1931 and 1932 the level of grain actually available for use was dangerously low. The Soviet government at the time tried to cover up its failure to increase grain production and refused to scale down grain procurements, claiming that more grain was available than was the case. From 1933 to 1954 the official evaluations presented the biological yield figures as though they were barn yield, and consequently exaggerated grain production by 20 to 30 per cent. In 1954 Khrushchev removed the post 1933 biological yield distortions but kept the pre-1933 subjective distortions.

Many historians who have examined the famines do not understand the level of genuine uncertainty that there was regarding grain statistics. They also fail to understand the complexity of the problem over the possible level of harvesting losses and how these impacted on the food supply problem, which has led to a misrepresentation of how the famine progressed.

Anne Appelbaum's treatment of grain availability in Ukraine epitomises the dangers of misunderstanding the data. She uses the official grain production figures of the time (for 1930–2) as if they were reliable indicators of the scale of production. She then (for the years after 1933) switches to the official Soviet post 1954 series of data which were 20 to 30 per cent lower than those officially used at the time. This provides her with the startling, but unjustifiable, conclusion that the level of grain production in 1931 and 1932 was about the same as in 1933 and that therefore there was no grain shortage in these years. This is incorrect. All experts, including Prokopovich, Jasny, Tauger, R.W. Davies and myself, agree that the official grain harvest figures for the late 1920s to 1932 need to be deflated, and that the levels in 1931 and 1932 were dangerously low.

But it is not just confusion over the scale of harvesting losses; most historians who have studied the famines in recent years are unaware of what is involved in the harvesting process and how harvesting losses might arise. Anne Appelbaum even thinks that 'Ukraine has two harvests a year with Winter wheat harvested in July and

August, and Spring grains harvested in October and November' (4). This is factually incorrect. In Ukraine and other parts of the Soviet Union the two different sowings are basically for the same harvest period. The only difference is that autumn sown grain lies dormant throughout winter but can then start to germinate immediately when the appropriate spring sowing period begins. This normally gives it a few extra days of growth before the onset of hot weather in the summer, which can be damaging to the plant, especially in the flowering period. Winter grains therefore normally have a slightly higher yield than spring grains. Harvesting of winter and spring grains occurs at roughly the same time with winter grains just a few days earlier than the spring grains.

The famine was associated with two years of harvest failure in 1931 and 1932. 1931 was a year of drought with demonstrably excessive temperatures and low rainfall in the early summer injuring the flowering and filling out of the grain. 1932 was a year in which the biological yield (prior to harvesting) was relatively normal, but in which harvest losses were excessively high as a result of damp weather during the harvest period, and a slow progression of the harvesting which greatly increased harvest losses.

The timing of the different stages of the grain harvest varies from region to region, and these regional differences are far more important than the differences between winter sown and spring sown grains. Harvesting begins earliest in the South of Ukraine, where the spring sowing conditions begin earlier and where the growth process ends earlier, and it then progresses in the following weeks to the more northerly regions, where sowings begin later and where the harvesting stage will be reached later. The harvesting process is a complex one, which at the time normally required three separate processes which all developed at separate rates. First the grain was mowed (cut). Then it was bound and stook into sheaves in the field. This was an insurance policy carried out to try to minimise harvest losses from rain and dampness in the fields that could rot the cut grain, if it was just laying around in the fields. The final stage was threshing, which removed the grain from the sheaves on the stalk and allowed it to be bagged and moved into the barns.

Detailed reports on the progress of these harvesting stages are available every five days throughout the harvesting period, and it is clear that in 1932 there was a major delay in the harvesting process, with much grain left unstocked and rotting in the fields. This occurred for a variety of reasons, including unusually damp weather in Kiev Oblast and low levels of traction power. Davies and I provide more detailed explanations of this in our 2004 *Years of Hunger: Soviet Agriculture 1929–1931*.

Appelbaum makes two references to the above text, although she preferred to cite grain production figures from a certain Bashkin (whose work is not listed in the bibliography) indicating that production only fell from 69.9 million tons in 1932–3 to 68.4 million tons in 1933–4. Our detailed, critical data analysis, however, estimates grain production in 1932–3 to have been 55 to 60 million tons, and that this was 15 to 17 million tons less than the following year when we estimate it to have grown to 70 to 77 million tons. It is this failure to understand that there really was a shortage of grain at this time that leads to the conclusion that there was an easy solution to

the problem, and that if Stalin failed to implement this easy solution, there must have been a political reason why he did. This is the reasoning for thinking that Stalin must have wanted to kill Ukrainians.

Robert Conquest had similarly originally underestimated the extent of the crisis and had earlier written that ‘Stalin could, at any time, have ordered the release of grain, and held off until the late Spring’ (*Harvest of Sorrow*, 326), but when confronted with the evidence, he changed his mind. When Davies and myself provided him with documented details about the scale of the crisis and the large number of secret relief measures carried out by the Politburo, and when we argued that we disagreed with Conquest’s published view that Stalin ‘wanted a famine’, and that ‘the Soviets did not want the famine to be coped with successfully’, he responded by modifying his earlier criticisms. He asked us to state publicly that it was not his (Conquest’s) opinion that ‘Stalin purposely inflicted the 1933 famine. No. What I argue is that with resulting famine imminent, he could have prevented it, but put “Soviet interest” other than feeding the starving first—thus consciously abetting it’ (Conquest letter to Wheatcroft, September 2003). We complied with Conquest’s wishes and included that statement in footnote 145 on page 441 of our book, which then received an approving blurb from Conquest. (Unfortunately Conquest’s blurb was only reproduced in the first edition). It is consequently wrong to cite the views of Conquest as a justification for accepting that the famine was a genocide, caused on purpose to kill Ukrainians. We all agreed that Stalin’s policy was brutal and ruthless and that its cover up was criminal, but we do not believe that it was done on purpose to kill people and cannot therefore be described as murder or genocide.

With regards to broadening the narrative to include other regions than Ukraine in discussions of the famine, I would welcome such a move including a broadening of the maps of district (raion) level mortality, below Oblast level. My map of 1933 district level mortality in Ukraine and in neighbouring Russian oblasts was published in two Ukrainian books in 2013 and are available on Melgrosh. They clearly demonstrate that claims that mortality fell immediately the Ukrainian border was passed are incorrect. It is unfortunate that Appelbaum uses the Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute (HURI) map, which fails to include mortality patterns in neighbouring Russian districts.

Discussions in the popular narrative of famine have changed over the years. During Soviet times there was a contrast between ‘man-made’ famine and ‘denial of famine’. ‘Man-made’ at this time largely meant as a result of policy. Then there was a contrast between ‘man-made on purpose’, and ‘man-made by accident’ with charges of criminal neglect and cover up. This stage seemed to have ended in 2004 when Robert Conquest agreed that the famine was not man-made on purpose. But in the following ten years there has been a revival of the ‘man-made on purpose’ side. This reflects both a reduced interest in understanding the economic history, and increased attempts by the Ukrainian government to classify the ‘famine as a genocide’. It is time to return to paying more attention to economic explanations.