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# Applebaum, Fitzpatrick and the Genocide Question

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## Roundtable on Soviet Famines

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Both Sheila Fitzpatrick and Anne Applebaum are fine historians who have made important contributions to the historiography of the Soviet Union. Applebaum works as a journalist and writer. But that is no reason to sniff at her contributions as ‘popular history’ or ‘history light’. In the books I have read, *Gulag: A History* (2003), *Iron Curtain* (2012) and *Red Famine* (2017), she has always strived to document her assertions, present logical and well-honed arguments and use archival and other documentary material where possible to forge new paths. One might not always agree with her conclusions, but that is a different question. If only more of our colleagues could write as well as Applebaum, think as clearly and attack important subjects the way she does, we would have a richer historiography as a result.

Fitzpatrick, now retired from her long-time professorial position at the University of Chicago, is the more senior of the two, and has been a crucial figure in the development of Soviet historiography. Some of her scholarship has been more controversial, some of it less. But there can be no question of her great distinction. She has played a pioneering role in the development of the Soviet field, authoring an astonishing series of important books, most of them based on hard, systematic archival research in the Soviet Union/Russian Republic, staking out seminal issues in Soviet history. It would be difficult to imagine the development of the field without her contributions.

Some of the heat in the exchanges between the two derives, no doubt, from political differences – and differences about how to think about academic historiography – which will and maybe should occur. Especially before the fall of the Soviet Union (and there are still hangovers in the Putin age), the Soviet field was rife with politics in one form or another. Some scholars were more or less sympathetic to the original Bolshevik mission (there were really very few genuine apologists for Stalin, this shibboleth should be dismissed); some were more or less hostile to the Soviet role in the world. The relative benefits of détente divided Soviet historians along political lines, as did the potential of Gorbachev for reforming the Soviet Union. Frequently the issue was less the attitude of intellectuals and scholars towards

the Soviet Union and more their stance towards their own society, as Paul Hollander showed us in his brilliant sociological studies decades ago. But politics can drive historians to develop new areas of interest and ask sometimes forgotten questions. It can be harmful when politics dominate a field (or a piece of scholarship.) But when they open up new avenues for inquiry and drive new kinds of research, they can be creative and invigorating for the historiography. Despite some rocky moments, I think the latter has been the case for the Soviet field.

The mostly unnecessary sniping aside, Fitzpatrick and Applebaum do not disagree all that much about the basic story of the *Holodomor*, the Ukrainian killer famine, the subject of Applebaum's new book. Fitzpatrick is on the mark when she writes: 'her [Applebaum's] take on Stalin's intentions come closer than I would to seeing him as specifically out to kill Ukrainians, but this is a legitimate difference of interpretation'. Of course, differences in interpretation can be crucial. In a key passage Applebaum writes that in November and December 1932 Stalin 'twisted the knife further in Ukraine, deliberately creating a deeper crisis', launching 'a famine within a famine, a disaster specifically targeted at Ukraine and Ukrainians'. Fitzpatrick refers to her 1994 book *Stalin's Peasants* to suggest that 'what Stalin wanted was not to kill millions (a course with obvious economic disadvantages) but rather to get as much grain out of them as possible', as if economic disadvantages mattered to him in the least. Fitzpatrick rightly points out that there was famine throughout the Soviet Union. There is no question that the Kazakhs suffered the worst proportionately; one quarter (Sarah Cameron) to one third (Nicolo Pianciola and Tanja Pentner) of the Kazakh population died as a consequence, in good measure because of Moscow's policies of 'sedentarisation'. But the deaths of some 4.5 million peasants in Ukraine and the northern Kuban (populated heavily by Ukrainians) was attributable, just as Applebaum in her response and the vast majority of historians of Ukraine point out, to 'special measures' applied almost exclusively to Ukraine: denying relief, blockading the Ukrainian countryside, returning scavenging peasants to starving villages, increasing requisition quotas, etc.

Fitzpatrick is right to note that it is not as clear as it should be what Applebaum is doing when she uses full archival references when citing collections. But it makes perfect sense, as she explains, that she wants to show exactly what documents are being cited given the controversies about the character of the *Holodomor*. We also know from the citations that these come from document collections, and we also know which documents she used directly in archives, so this should not be an issue. Sometimes 'academic' historians legitimately use this technique, as well, as a way to provide fuller information about the documentary base. So many recent and excellent documentary collections have been published by the Ukrainians, it is a real service of Applebaum to have waded through them all for evidence about the *Holodomor*. Fitzpatrick underlines this fact as well.

Finally, there is the ever-sensitive issue of genocide and the *Holodomor*. We all understand that the Ukrainians for the most part now believe that the famine of 1932–3 was a genocidal attack on their nationality and on their people. That it was a case of genocide has become a part of the process of Ukrainian nation building, as

most scholars, including both Fitzpatrick and Applebaum, understand. Unfortunately, anti-Russian feelings are sometimes stirred up in Ukraine by the rhetoric of genocide. But this does not mean that it was not genocide. It is fair to say that most scholars in the growing field of genocide studies have no problem thinking about the *Holodomor* as genocide. Raphael Lemkin, who both created the important neologism ‘genocide’ in 1944 and was the founder of the historical study of genocide, believed that the *Holodomor* was genocide. Like Lemkin, genocide historians explore the history of mass killing as a way to better understand the complexities and commonalities of the attempted elimination of peoples and human groups ‘in whole or in part’ as a way to prevent this from happening in the future. Genocide is part of human history and constitutes, as many international jurists and historians agree, ‘the crime of crimes’.

But most historians of the Soviet Union are allergic to the word when thinking about Stalin or the Ukrainian famine. Why this is the case is more complicated than simply ‘politics’, though they certainly play a role. The traditions of the field, the embedded historiographical evaluations of Stalin and Stalinism, especially in relation to his modernisation programs and ‘preparation for the war’, the character of the source base for evaluating decision-making at the top, which is thinner than one would wish, and the inevitable comparison with Hitler and Nazism when the ‘G word’ is used, militate against considering Stalin from this perspective. Fitzpatrick really represents the ‘field’ in this sense. Applebaum finds that such rejection defies logic.

In her review, Fitzpatrick, who resolutely rejects the proposition that Stalin committed genocide in the Ukrainian case, expresses relief that Applebaum agrees. Applebaum shoots back that Fitzpatrick could not have possibly understood the book since it is a flat out description of genocide. If that is the case, Fitzpatrick responds, then she takes back her praise. But are they really so far apart – ‘180 degrees’ – as Applebaum puts it? Both, we should underline, are dedicated to uncovering the empirical basis for Stalin’s attack on Ukraine and the Ukrainians, and Fitzpatrick rightly praises Applebaum for doing so. I doubt they would differ much on ‘the facts’ of the case, as Fitzpatrick indicated in the original review. Fitzpatrick is right to the extent that Applebaum does not use genocide as the organising principle of the book. There is no discussion of the famine as genocide before the epilogue. It is not, as one might expect, in the title. In the epilogue, Applebaum expresses some frustration, which I suspect Fitzpatrick – and most sensible people – would share, that the genocide issue has clouded Russian–Ukrainian discussions of the famine and Russian–Ukrainian relations, one side spending too much time and effort denying, the other in trumpeting, genocide.

In his important and widely read contribution to the historiography of the *Holodomor*, *Bloodlands* (2010), Timothy Snyder relegates the genocide issue to an appendix at the end on ‘Numbers and Terms’, where he expresses the view that the genocide issue is unnecessary to an understanding of the *Holodomor* and that there is no reason to deal with it, even if he believes that it was genocide. In a 2017 interview he states that the term is just too ‘problematic’ to insert into otherwise difficult and complex debates about mass killing in East European history. He has a point, of

course, but that does not in any way mean that the *Holodomor* was not genocide and should not be investigated as such. Applebaum does not go as far as Snyder, or for that matter Robert Conquest, in his pioneering *The Harvest of Sorrow*, who also found the genocide issue unnecessary for his argument, though he begins his book with a stunning image of the Ukrainian countryside as 'one vast Belsen'. In her book Applebaum does not straight out call the *Holodomor* a case of genocide and deal with the implications of that conclusion, which is partly the source of Fitzpatrick's confusion. But like Conquest's classic study, everything she says about Stalin's attack on the Ukrainians and the Ukrainian nation makes clear that her evidence and argument is aligned with the analysis of genocide.

Genocide is a historical concept that derives meaning from an almost seventy-five year melding of principles of international justice and historical investigation. There is no evidence in the least that Lemkin was inspired in his work by the *Holodomor*; rather he and his biographers all mention the importance to his views of the Armenian genocide and the Simele Massacre of Syriac Christians in northern Iraq in August 1933. In any case, Lemkin was as much a historian as he was an international lawyer. It makes no sense to confine his term to a judicial closet and ignore it in historical writing. In fact, the dynamic character of the genocide concept derives precisely from the on-going interaction between history and legal proceedings regarding its character, beginning with Nuremberg in 1946, where, despite Lemkin's efforts, the idea of genocide was essentially marginalised during the proceedings, and continuing with the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide unanimously adopted by the United Nations on 9 December 1948. Even today, for example, the interaction between the historiography of the Cambodian genocide between 1975 and 1979 and the contemporary trial of its perpetrators by the hybrid Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia continues to provide insights into both.

Historians are not bound by the usage of genocide in the courts of Bosnia, Rwanda, Sierra Leone and Cambodia, or by the International Criminal Court, which has, for example, collected evidence on the question of genocide in Syria. But our comprehension of the historical phenomenon of mass murder is enriched by the robust and sometimes innovative jurisprudence that has expanded our understanding, for example, of rape in genocide and of the issue of intentionality, which is broached in a number of contributions to this discussion. (The courts also are deeply influenced by history and historians, as they repeatedly turn to historical literature and expert witnesses, frequently historians, for information and insights.) What the International Criminal Tribunal for Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) demonstrated in a series of careful analyses of the roles of Slobodan Milošević and Ratko Mladić in the Bosnian case was that intention could be discerned from the actual process of genocide (and genocide, like the *Holodomor*, is a fluid, complex process, not an episode with a clear start and finish and an easily identifiable plan of action.). Intention, in short, is revealed through the act itself rather than through conscious premeditation; it can be deduced from the structure of the events. I would suggest that the same is true for the *Holodomor*. In one sense, I agree with some her critics, Fitzpatrick included. There is not much in the way of unambiguous evidence of Stalin's articulated intent to kill Ukrainian peasants.

But the fact that millions died in the famine of 1932–3, purposely intensified by the regime in a number of political, legal and economic ways, indicated that Stalin wanted to break the back of the Ukrainian peasantry. This combined with the heightened attack on the Ukrainian intelligentsia and Stalin's brutal private communications blaming the hunger on the Ukrainian peasants themselves and promising retribution, provide convincing weight to the argument for intentionality and genocide. Starving people to death is one of the potential weapons of genocidaires, whether in the sixteenth-century Spanish conquest of the Americas, settler (sometimes classified as colonial) genocides of indigenous peoples, Pol Pot's mass murder of his Cambodian enemies or Stalin's crushing of the Ukrainian peasantry.

Historians are interested in the question of motivation in genocide, as well as intent, while international jurists do not consider motivation essential to their cases, except to the extent that it sheds light on intent. Why did Stalin attack the Ukrainians? Some will deny that the Ukrainians were singled out at all in the famine. But if we conclude that they suffered proportionately much worse than the rest of the population, as did, of course, the Kazakhs, then one has to ask why. Was it the angry response to the Ukrainians' determined resistance to collectivisation by the ever vengeful and ruthless Stalin, portrayed in volume two of Stephen Kotkin's recent biography? Was it a calculated attempt to secure Ukraine from alleged Polish attempts, mostly fanciful, to pry it loose from the Soviet Union, something the dictator frequently mentioned in his internal discussions with leading comrades? Did Stalin seek to destroy the Ukrainian peasantry as a way to eliminate Ukrainian nationalism and control Ukraine in case of a coming war? No doubt all of these motivations worked together in that terrible period to bring about starvation and death.

Applebaum's book is an extremely important addition to the historiography of the *Holodomor* and of the Soviet Union. *Red Famine* will be read and discussed by a generation of graduate students and scholars in Soviet and Ukrainian history, as well as, one hopes, by the broader reading public. Many academic Soviet historians will complain about this or that slip up in her book. They will accuse her of having political motivations, without discussing their own political preconceptions that frequently shape the way they deal with Stalin and the Soviet Union. But there has not been to my knowledge a history of this scope, sophistication and reliability written about this crucial subject. In this sense, the book is not unlike many of the contributions of Fitzpatrick, which have shaped the Soviet history field and made up the reading lists of thousands of colleagues and graduate students over the decades.