
Debating Famine and Genocide

Roundtable on Soviet Famines

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Between academic writing of history – what professional historians, usually employed by universities, do – and popular history – what journalists, celebrities and independent writers usually with some claim on fame do – there is a growing intermediate genre, which I will call ‘history light’. While popular history is produced rather quickly and often with armies of researchers working for the celebrity author, history light is artisanal. It takes more time and bears the mark of the scholar/journalist author. Such writers, smart people with a flair for fluid prose, have turned out bestsellers and prizewinners that have found a broad reading public. They can be read with enjoyment and profit by the general public and scholars alike. History light may not be as sensationalist or prurient as many popular histories, but neither is it as thickly evidenced or balanced as the best academic histories. Such books usually have a strong point of view, often supportive of the liberal/conservative status quo in the United States, and in the case of those that deal with Russia or the Soviet Union, usually condemnatory of the Soviet Union, communism and extremes of left and right. They often tend to be indictments rather than historically empathetic; that is, they shape evidence to a particular conviction instead of allowing a more complex, perhaps even ambiguous, reading.

Red Famine by journalist and pundit Anne Appelbaum is an exceptionally well-written and argued example of history light. A synthetic work, it utilises the existing scholarship and new archival findings, published and excavated, particularly from holdings in Ukraine. The story she tells is heart wrenching, a colossal tragedy launched by a state against its own people ostensibly in the name of a noble cause. Sheila Fitzpatrick’s work on Stalinism falls squarely into the field of academic scholarship. Her major contributions to the history of Soviet peasants – *Stalin’s Peasants; Everyday Stalinism* – are original investigations based on exhaustive digging in Soviet and post-Soviet archives that laid the ground for new understandings of the fraught relationship between the Stalinist regime and the village.

Both Fitzpatrick and Applebaum, each in her own way, shows that in its drive to collectivise the peasants of the Soviet Union and collect the grain it required to feed the cities and export abroad, Stalin’s government ruthlessly confiscated the

produce, food and even seed grain from its peasants and precipitated a devastating famine in Ukraine, the North Caucasus, the lower Volga region, Kazakhstan and elsewhere. Millions died, people resorted to cannibalism and the regime turned a blind eye to massive suffering for several years. Assisted often reluctantly by local collaborators, the outsiders sent to collect the grain were extraordinarily cruel. As true believers, they tortured people and watched them die, convinced that they were building a better world. The future dissident Lev Kopelev, then an enthusiastic communist, remembered, 'we were realising historical necessity. We were performing our revolutionary duty. We were obtaining grain for the socialist fatherland. For the five-year plan' (cited in Applebaum, 232). This was a war between city and country, communist zealots against peasants desperate to survive and opposing visions of who the other was.

Applebaum more explicitly than Fitzpatrick links the famine to the nationality question, a central concern of the Stalinist regime. While peasants were being battered by draconian degrees that repeatedly raised the quotas of grain to be requisitioned and exported from Ukraine, the government launched an attack on intellectuals, accusing them of nationalism. These purges were particularly widespread and vicious in Ukraine. The very programmes of Ukrainisation, which had been encouraged by the regime and by Stalin himself, now became anathema, dangerous deviations that resulted in thousands being arrested, imprisoned, exiled and executed. His ire, now turned on the national aspirations of non-Russians, reverberated throughout the non-Russian republics and districts but was especially intense in Ukraine,

The very scale of the deaths in Ukraine, the fact that the famine was induced by misguided and brutal policies by the Soviet state and the clear evidence that ethnic Ukrainians suffered in extraordinary numbers have led some scholars and readers to conclude that an exterminationist programme directed at Ukrainians, what has come to be known as the Death Famine (*Holodomor*), constituted a genocide comparable to the Armenian Genocide of the First World War and the Holocaust of the Second World War. Raphael Lemkin, the originator of the concept and word 'genocide' thought so, as does Anne Appelbaum (233).

The question whether the *Holodomor* is a genocide rests on how genocide is defined. This may appear too legalistic an approach for historians or journalists but extending the meaning of genocide to any incident of mass killing unnecessarily dilutes the concept and clouds explanation of why genocide. As defined by the United Nations Genocide Convention, genocide is about the killing of a people, not the killing of people. That is, the intentional mass murder is directed against a cultural, national, ethnic or religious group, in the exact words of the Convention: 'acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group'. Genocide, in other words, in legal terms and international law, is a subset of crimes against humanity, and that larger category certainly would include the *Holodomor*, the Kazakh famine and other state-directed attacks on social or political groups. In order to make the famines a genocide under the UN definition, it would be necessary to demonstrate that they were ethnocides rather than simply mass killings. Intention as well as principal target is key. Several of the contributors to

this forum make the crucial point that class and nationality, the social and the ethnic, cannot easily be disentangled in the case of Ukrainians and Kazakhs. Collectivisation was an assault on them as peasants and nomads, on their traditional way of life, even as the principal intention of the regime was to secure high grain requisitions, not to deliberately kill them. The mass deaths were the consequence of horrific policies brutally applied, and while they do not fit the UN definition of genocide, they unquestionably were crimes against humanity. A more relevant frame than genocide, again as suggested by some of the forum participants, is empire. The Soviet state was an imperial regime that maintained, even promoted, social and ethnic distinctions that made it easy and acceptable to punish differentially parts of its population. The *Holodomor* and the Kazakh famine were imperial assaults of the centre against distinct peripheries, though it would be going too far to reduce them to Russia versus Ukraine/Kazakhstan, part of a series of colonial impositions undifferentiated over time.

Genocide is not only about intentions, though the intention to annihilate or render impotent a people, is important. It is also about consequences. The Soviet state had the power to destroy Ukraine and Ukrainians, but it neither intended to do so nor came any where close to annihilating a people or their culture. Throughout the famine there were secret relief efforts, and in the end grain was sent to Ukraine. Ukrainians continued to benefit from Soviet nationality policies but were severely restrained, unable to express openly nationalist sentiments. Their sense of oppression is completely justified, but so were the feelings of those in Ukraine who supported the Soviet Union and its peculiar idea of socialism.

Published in the heat of the current Ukrainian conflict, Applebaum's book is written largely from a pro-Ukrainian perspective. Indeed, it has a strong anti-communist, anti-Soviet and even anti-Russian perspective. Here Ukrainians are victims of colonising empires, particularly the Russian and Soviet empires, and while they have suffered and endured from their own internal divisions and conflicts, they are presented primarily as victims and only occasionally as perpetrators. This view of the colonised, understandable from both a moral and politically partisan perspective, is the polar opposite of what might be called the imperial view still shared by many Russians, that is, that Ukraine was part of a larger Russia or a member state within the Soviet Union that benefitted (and suffered) with the rest of the empire. Both tsarist Russian officials, Soviet leaders and the current ruling elite of the Russian Republic speak in this idiom. The two views are mutually unintelligible. As Applebaum aptly puts it, 'of all the many things that were lost in the propaganda war between the Soviet Union and Ukrainian nationalism, none disappeared more quickly than nuance' (53).

Wrestling with the complexities presented by the archival record, Applebaum essentially ends up making a tight connection between the rebellion and violence of 1919 and the mass protests of desperate peasants against the radical land reform of 1930, a conclusion that Andrea Graziosi also shares. While she points out that the political police 'deliberately embroidered' (152) and exaggerated the degree of nationalist organisation, the rebellion certainly had nationalist overtones and, as the Joint State Political Directorate (*Obyedinyonnoye gosudarstvennoye politicheskoye upravleniye pri SNK*

SSSR; OGPU) claimed, was clearly anti-Soviet. The documents she quotes show how concerned Stalin was that 'we could lose Ukraine' (185). State security was his major concern. Her strongest argument, however, is that the Soviets learned from the civil war that Ukraine was potentially a rebellious region that could easily attempt to separate from Russia or tempt foreign invasion. Following Graziosi, Appelbaum points out that the intensity of the famine was greatest in precisely those regions where the social and nationalist rebellions of 1918–20 and the resistance to dekulakisation and collectivisation of 1930–1 were strongest.

For Applebaum the Bolsheviks were neither simple opportunistic pragmatists nor devoted to their ideology. They were instrumentalists, deceptively making concessions while holding true to their goals of power, conquest and social engineering. Her understanding of early Soviet nationality policies is primitive. She fails to appreciate how dedicated Lenin and many Bolsheviks were to the principle of national self-determination even as they fought a deadly war against separatist nationalists and foreign interventionists. Contradictory impulses overlapped and undercut maximalist goals of those Bolsheviks who opposed any support for national differences and cultures and those, including Lenin, who supported autonomy and indigenisation for non-Russians. After Lenin was incapacitated by strokes, the centralising tendencies favoured by Stalin and others won out, but Applebaum's essentialising of Bolshevism, as if a single power hungry, monopolistic and imperial policy was foreordained by personal or ideological prescript, erases the various possibilities contained within early Bolshevism. Her own telling of the story belies her claims that 'the Bolsheviks were committed to a heavily centralised state and the destruction of independent institutions, whether economic, political or cultural' (70).

There is an analytical casualness about many supposedly explanatory statements in *Red Famine*. Take for instance this early example: 'the absence of natural borders helps explain why Ukrainians failed, until the late twentieth century, to establish a sovereign state' (2). Such a breezy claim hides more than it reveals. Did not other peoples form sovereign states without 'natural borders?' Russia, for example, or Poland? Are borders in fact natural, defined by ranges of mountains or difficult to ford rivers? Or, as argued by recent scholarship, are borders not historical products of human construction, forged by wars, diplomacy and the decisions of statesmen and women? The answer to the question, why there was no sovereign Ukraine until the twentieth century, would probably require a scholarly article or monograph and would involve larger issues of the politics of empires and the vexed question of when Ukrainians consolidated as a nation. The rest of the paragraph takes for granted that Ukrainians had a national identity from roughly the late Middle Ages, that is, a distinct language, their own foods, customs, traditions, legends, heroes and villains. So much for all the work in the last three decades about how nations are made or the evidence of social, linguistic and regional divisions and conflicts that have marked Ukraine up to the present time. None of that seems to matter. Nations and nationalism are taken for granted, natural products of time and place, with their own inherent authenticity and legitimacy. Empires, on the other hand, are regarded from a present projected into the past as illegitimate results of conquest and colonisation rather than ubiquitous

form of statehood for much of human history with their own claims to authority and sovereignty.

Because nationalism is taken for granted and understood as the natural default position of any people, there is little need in this story to probe the depth, spread, intensity or nature of Ukrainian national identification. There is almost no discussion of the national sensibilities of ordinary Ukrainians. The evidence provided here adds up to a picture of peasants who identified with their way of life before collectivisation, people ready to defend their homes, livestock and families. When attacked by outsiders – communists, Russians, Ukrainian collaborators – they resisted as much as they were physically able. Soviet nationality policy in the 1920s promoted Ukrainisation, and identity with Ukraine and the idea of a nation certainly become stronger. The onslaught of collectivisation produced an even tighter sense of us and them, of peasants as Ukrainians being battered by the Soviet state and of communists who could easily be conflated with Russians. As Applebaum shows, Ukrainians who had survived the famine developed their own alternative narrative to the official Soviet denial that a massive crime had been committed by the very regime that had promised them emancipation and progress.

In her review of the book in *The Guardian* Sheila Fitzpatrick lauded what she mistakenly took to be Applebaum's view that the *Holodomor* was not a genocide. In her reply to Fitzpatrick, Applebaum made it clearer than she had in her book that she subscribes to the view that Stalin deliberately set out to kill millions of Ukrainians through starvation: 'indeed, the central argument of my book, which [Fitzpatrick] does not ever address in her review, is that Stalin intentionally used the famine not only to kill Ukrainians but to destroy the Ukrainian national movement, which he perceived as a threat to Soviet power, and to destroy the idea of Ukraine as an independent nation, forever'. This is an extreme claim that Applebaum's own evidence does not actually demonstrate. Much of the detail presented in this book adds up more plausibly to a story quite close to Fitzpatrick's paraphrase of her own conclusion in *Stalin's Peasants* 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 – the problem being that nobody knew how much it was possible to get without starving them to death and ruining the next harvest. But that was an argument about the Soviet Union as a whole.'

Applebaum explicitly connects the regime's anxiety about Ukraine in the 1930s and beyond to current events: 'indeed, Moscow's paranoia about the counter-revolutionary potential of Ukraine continued after the Second World War, and into the 1970s and 1980s. It was taught to every successive generation of secret policemen, from the OGPU to the NKVD to the KGB, as well as every successive generation of party leaders. Perhaps it even helped mould the thinking of the post-Soviet elite, long after the USSR ceased to exist' (158). Those continuities that reach to the present day are deployed to explain Putin's actions in Ukraine. According to Applebaum, Russia has revived its imperialist ambitions and Ukraine is the current target.

Nationalisms gain their shape and strength from the particular discourses within which the nation is imagined, the styles and affective tones that link the people of

the nation together in solidarity and the ways they distinguish themselves from the alien other. Ukraine can be imagined as connected through its historical experiences, painful and destructive as well as culturally formative with shared traditions with its neighbors, or in a more exclusivist and extreme form. As the nationalist Ivan Drach put it in 1993, ‘the first lesson which is becoming an integral part of Ukrainian consciousness is that Russian has never had and never will have any other interest in Ukraine beyond the total destruction of the Ukrainian nation’ (345). The famine has become a central source of a particular Ukrainian identity, one that promotes the view – as Applebaum puts it – of ‘centuries of Russian imperial colonisation and decades of Soviet repression’ and ‘the USSR’s systematic destruction of Ukrainian culture and memory’ (345, 357). Instead of a shared, complexly interwoven history, this vision separates and distances Ukraine from Russia, relating their fates as fundamentally hostile and antagonistic, an image that seems confirmed by the current conflict between the two countries. But serious, balanced historical exploration belies such a consistently Manichean picture. Here Applebaum’s final sentence in the book – ‘as a nation, Ukrainians know what happened in the twentieth century, and that knowledge can help shape the future’ – should be rephrased as questions: what kinds of knowledge do they have of their history and how in the future will they imagine a more useful past?