

Communism and Hunger: Introduction

Andrea Graziosi

National Agency for the Evaluation of Universities and Research Institutes, Rome

Frank E. Sysyn

Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies, University of Alberta

Over the past two decades, important studies of the famines in the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China have transformed our understanding of these events and laid the groundwork for the first attempts at comparative analysis.¹ Nevertheless, the great twentieth-century famines caused by state policies remain relatively little studied. We still lack a systematic comparison of their features, at least in part because of the difficulty in conceptualizing the possibility of man-made famine in modern times and because a topic like "Communism and Hunger" may seem to be a contradiction in terms. Yet even a simple list of the past century's major famines suggests that the topic is badly in need of attention. In fact, with the exception of the 1943 Bengal famine with its approximately two million victims, all of the other major famines of the twentieth century are directly connected to socialist "experiments": in 1921 and 1922 in Russia and Ukraine (1 million–1.5 million deaths); in 1931, 1932, and 1933 in the USSR (6.5 million–7.5 million deaths, of which 4 million were in Ukraine and 1.3 million–1.5 million in Kazakhstan); in 1946 and 1947 in the USSR (1 million–1.5 million deaths); from 1958 to 1962 in China (30 million–45 million deaths); from 1983 to 1985 in Ethiopia (0.5 million–1.0 million deaths); and from 1994 to 1998 in North Korea (estimates vary from a few hundred thousand to more than 2 million deaths).

¹ In spite of the fifty-five years dividing the two famines, only ten years separate the two first important monographs—*The Harvest of Sorrow: Soviet Collectivization and the Terror Famine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986) by Robert Conquest, and Jasper Becker's *Hungry Ghosts: Mao's Secret Famine* (New York: The Free Press, 1996). Comparative studies are more recent: Matthias Middell and Felix Wemheuer, eds., *Hunger and Scarcity under State-Socialism* (Leipzig: Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 2012); Felix Wemheuer, *Famine Politics in Maoist China and the Soviet Union* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2014); and, above all, Lucien Bianco, *La récidive, révolution russe, révolution chinoise* (Paris: Gallimard, 2014).

As Lucien Bianco rightly noted in *La récidive*, the Soviet famine of 1931-33 and the Chinese famine of 1958-62 share essential and evident affinities, which do not exclude key differences. Even the percentage of victims in proportion to the total population in both states is surprisingly similar: in the USSR there were approximately 7 million deaths out of approximately 160 million inhabitants. In China estimates vary between 30 million and 45 million deaths out of a population exceeding 600 million. Government policies thus caused the death of five percent of the inhabitants in each country, with victims overwhelmingly concentrated in rural areas.

These policies were marked by two gigantic attempts to transform and socialize—and *not* just “modernize”—economic and social structures quickly and radically in conditions of economic backwardness: Stalin’s Great Turning Point (GTP) and Mao’s Great Leap Forward (GLF), launched respectively in 1929 and 1958. The main tool in both attempts was central planning. Yet, as Wei and Yang and, long before them, Brutzkus convincingly argued, both “experiments” demonstrated “systematic failure.”² By eliminating all manner of checks and balances, planning from above made systemic failures both possible and probable—with tragic results. As planning ceased to be an expression of economic thinking, it became an instrument in the hands of despots who openly admitted their ignorance of economics. In both the USSR and Communist China the socialist economy thus turned into a *subjective* system ruled over by politics and policies, will and wishes.

As one of us has written, “The basic idea behind these policies was to make agriculture pay for the transformation of the country by seizing an ever-increasing amount of agricultural output in order to feed expanding cities and to procure through export at least part of the hard currency needed to import the requisite technology, while the mobilization of peasants would provide the needed work force. In both cases, these policies were justified by the claim that the rapid socialization of the countryside would result in an immediate increase in productivity, thus making it possible to extract resources and labor without damaging the interests of the remaining peasants. Rather, their lot too would be improved by a jump in agricultural and industrial production.”³

² See Boris Brutzkus, *Economic Planning in Soviet Russia* (London: Routledge, 1935); and Wei Li and Dennis Tao Yang, “The Great Leap Forward: Anatomy of a Central Planning Disaster,” *Journal of Political Economy* 113.4 (2005): 840-77.

³ Andrea Graziosi, “Stalin’s and Mao’s Political Famines: Similarities and Differences,” forthcoming in the *Journal of Cold War Studies*.

Impressive similarities co-exist, with crucial differences. Both the USSR and China were ruled by despots whose psychological and cultural make-ups became crucial factors. Stalin and Mao were indeed very different people, judging from their behaviour during the crises they caused. Furthermore, China was poorer than the Soviet Union and rested on a much more fragile food balance, which was easier to alter. In China, therefore, the break-up of the central system was much more dramatic and produced results far more catastrophic. Such results in the USSR were confined—albeit for different reasons—to specific republics.

As the data on the victims prove, the Soviet famine was in fact composed of a series of different famines, among which the Ukrainian and the Kazakh cases stand out. While these belonged in the general framework of Stalin's GTP, they also possessed quite distinctive features. The "national question," in the sense that Stalin understood the term,⁴ thus came to play a role that was absent from the Chinese case, even though the repressive and assimilationist policies associated with the GLF did contribute to the igniting of the Tibetan great revolt of 1959 and the Uighurs greatly suffered because of them.⁵

In particular, mortality peaks in the USSR were strictly—and not casually—related to nationality. In China they tended to be associated with the geography of a weak transportation network that predetermined the regions upon which the state's predatory policies were concentrated,⁶ as well as with the activism and the extremism of local leaders. This difference may help explain another crucial disparity: the Chinese Communist cadres' much higher degree of violence and brutality, which was surprising even to Soviet historians, used to the political police reports of the early 1930s

⁴ Stalin, like Lenin before him, thought of the national question along lines typical of the European continental tradition: the noun "nation" and its adjective "national" were meant and used in what might be called their 1848 meanings, those of Mazzini or Lemkin: a nation is a people defined by certain "objective" characteristics, among which language is paramount, and capable of thinking of itself as such owing to the efforts of a political and intellectual "vanguard." The nation is thus neither purely objective nor a pure act of will or "imagination," but a combination of the two and thus a historical object with a beginning, and possibly an end. See Andrea Graziosi, "Nationalism and Communism," *Cambridge Encyclopedia of Communism*, forthcoming.

⁵ See A. Tom Grunfeld, *The Making of Modern Tibet* (Armonk and London: M. E. Sharpe, 1996); and Wemheuer, *Famine Politics*, 157-74.

⁶ See Anthony Garnaut, "The Geography of the Great Leap Famine," *Modern China*, 40.3 (2014): 315-48.

about the ferocity of those who conducted the collectivization drive and the grain and food requisitions in the countryside.

The chronology of mortality also points to important differences. While in most of the Soviet Union, including in Kazakhstan (albeit in a much more intense way), as in China, people died over a relatively long period, most of Ukraine's four million deaths—more than sixty percent of all the famine victims in the USSR—were concentrated in the few weeks between the beginning of April and the end of June 1933. This points to a political decision to use famine as a weapon to solve a specific "national" problem. This possibility is validated by other indicators. A comparable phenomenon does not appear in China.

In China the scale of the national famine was much greater than in the USSR, and the Chinese leadership's reaction to the catastrophe was quite different from the Soviet one. One could claim that Stalin won his battle. He subdued the peasantry and Ukraine and he consolidated his grip on the Party and the country—as shown by the 1934 "Congress of Victors" and by the ease with which he liquidated his supposed enemies within the Party in the Great Show Trials of 1936-38. In contrast, in early 1962 Mao grudgingly had to admit his responsibility for a disaster that leaders such as Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping openly acknowledged. Mao's grip on power was thus weakened, and to retake the positions he lost he was forced to launch the Great Cultural Proletarian Revolution three years later to "bombard the headquarters," that is, the Party centre.

There are also differences, indicated by Khrushchev's actions in 1956 and Deng's in 1978, in the famines' impact on the histories of the USSR and China. In 1956, three years after Stalin's death, in his secret report at the Twentieth Party Congress (which played not a minor role in unleashing Mao's GLF), Khrushchev extolled Stalin's GTP and its success, which, he said, laid the basis of Soviet socialism. With the "Four Modernizations" he launched two years after Mao's death, Deng reversed Mao's policies but did not attack him publicly. Instead, Deng formalized Mao's cult. Thereby, he upturned the country's economic system while consolidating its political one. This was the exact opposite of what Khrushchev had done. By 1980 key Chinese Party leaders were already mentioning the Chinese famine and its millions of victims.

The GTP and the GLF, as well as the famines they caused, were thus pivotal events in the histories of the two states, but in different—perhaps even opposite—ways. This difference was bolstered by events following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, when the Holodomor (as the 1933 Ukrainian "Great Famine" was then renamed) became an important tool of state building and legitimization in Ukraine and thus affirmed the crucial "national" component of the Soviet famines.

A close study of what Lucien Bianco termed *l'évidente parenté* between the Soviet and Chinese famines,⁷ their analogies and their differences, thus opens new and at times unexpected vistas that allow us not only to better grasp each event in its own specificity but also to throw new light on fundamental questions about the relationships of peasants, the state, and the "national question," despotism's mechanisms and consequences, the role of ideology and planning, and human reactions in extreme conditions.

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In planning its second major conference, the Holodomor Research and Education Consortium sought to bring together specialists who would address the commonalities *and* singularities of the famines they study. Three of the papers deal with famine within a single state or Soviet republic and lay the groundwork for comparative discussion. Nicholas Werth examines the dynamics of the economics and, above all, the politics that created the man-made famines in the USSR. He delineates the stages that led to the all-Soviet famine, the very specific famine that decimated Kazakhstan's herders, and the Holodomor in Ukraine. Sarah Cameron explores the events and research on the Kazakh famine, including issues related to sources and contemporary politics that have resulted in it receiving much less attention than the Ukrainian famine despite the greater proportion of the population that died. She emphasizes that many Western scholars have continued to see the Kazakh mass deaths as the result of miscalculation rather than the violent policies of the regime. Zhou Xun characterizes the Great Famine in China of 1958-62 as the largest in human history. Pointing to the relative paucity of research about that famine, she recounts the still ongoing problems in obtaining access to archival materials. Particularly noteworthy is her discussion of the kinds of sources, written and oral, she has been able to assemble in the periods when Chinese authorities permitted at least limit access to them.

The second block of articles addresses the famines comparatively and the component of Communist ideology in their nature and origins. Lucien Bianco, a specialist on China, and Andrea Graziosi, a student of the Soviet Union, provide complementary discussions of the similarities and differences between the man-made famines in the two largest Communist states. They deal with topics such as the role of the leader, the centre's

⁷ During his presentation "Communisme et famine: URSS, 1931-1933; Chine 1958-1962," Journée d'étude INALCO-EHESS "Famines soviétique et chinoise," Paris, 18 October 2013.

relation to the provinces, the degree of intentionality, attitudes toward the peasantry, and the national composition of the victims. Niccolò Pianciola applies a transnational approach to history in looking at the large Central Asian steppe and the nomadic societies to explore famines in a geographic zone crossing political boundaries. His study permits us to view the similar and differing policies of the Soviet and Chinese states from the point of view of a geographic and economic zone with a millennia-old tradition of nomadism and pastoralism. In addition, Andrea Graziosi has compiled a bibliography of seminal literature addressing the individual famines as well as the general question of famines under Communist systems.

In dealing with the massive famines the two largest Communist states produced, this collection sets forth numerous hypotheses and research agendas for exploring the commonalities and specificities of Communist-engendered political famines. If this collection inspires further discussion of the nature of political famines, the Holodomor Research and Education Consortium will further fulfil its mandate to examine the Holodomor in a comparative context and contribute to new directions in research.