Stalin's and Mao's Famines: Similarities and Differences

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Abstract: This essay addresses the similarities and differences between the cluster of Soviet famines in 1931-33 and the great Chinese famine of 1958-1962. The similarities include: Ideology; planning; the dynamics of the famines; the relationship among harvest, state procurements and peasant behaviour; the role of local cadres; life and death in the villages; the situation in the cities vis-à-vis the countryside, and the production of an official lie for the outside world. Differences involve the following: Dekulakization; peasant resistance and anti-peasant mass violence; communes versus sovkhozes and kolkhozes; common mess halls; small peasant holdings; famine and nationality; mortality peaks; the role of the party and that of Mao versus Stalin's; the way out of the crises, and the legacies of these two famines; memory; sources and historiography.

Keywords: Communism, Famines, Nationality, Despotism, Peasants

The value of comparing the Soviet famines with other famines, first and foremost the Chinese famine resulting from the Great Leap Forward (GLF), has been clear to me since the time I started comparing the Soviet famines at least a decade ago (Graziosi 2009, 1-19). Yet the impulse to approach this comparison systematically came later, and I owe it to Lucien Bianco, who invited me to present my thoughts on the matter in 2013.[1]

As I proceeded, the potential of this approach grew beyond my expectations. On the one hand, it enables us to better grasp the characteristics of the Soviet (1931-33) and Chinese famines and their common features, shedding new light on both and on crucial questions such

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[1] At the "Journée d'étude 'Famines soviétique et chinoise,'" sponsored by the School for Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences (Paris) and held at the National Institute of Languages and Oriental Civilizations in Paris on 18 October 2013. Comparative studies are few and recent: see Yang's article, the collection edited by Middell and Wemheuer, Wemheuer's monograph, and, above all, Bianco's book.

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as state-peasant relations in socialist-type modernization efforts or the relevance of the national question in such circumstances. On the other hand, it raises the question of the presence within twentieth-century history of a phenomenon whose unique importance has yet to be grasped—that of peacetime political famines.

In this contribution I shall rather schematically present the results of my research and reflections on the matter, discussing the similarities first and then the differences. Needless to say, many phenomena could be placed under both headings, and I have assigned them to one or the other on the basis of the traits I deem prevalent.

I. The Similarities

1. *Ideology.* Here this refers to two sets of phenomena. On the one hand, they are the ideological as well as psychological features that the Stalinist leadership of 1929 shared with the Maoist leadership of 1958, when the Great Turning Point (GTP) and the GLF were launched in China. The features include faith in miracles and ignorance of economic mechanisms; the cult around the power of will (and thus of "politics"), an extreme and quite surprising form of subjectivism held by self-avowed Marxists; faith in the economic potential of socialism (still strong in 1956, both in the USSR and in China), and in particular, the belief that collectivization would greatly improve productivity without provoking a crisis and thus allow the extraction of major "tribute" from the countryside (Stalin's concept, which Mao copied).

On the other hand, there are ideological trends that accompanied the unfolding of the GTP and the GLF and the crises they generated, such as the debasement of the peasants' image and status; the placement of state interests well above those of the population; the justification of one's own actions through lies and edulcoration; the conscious building of personality cults and their use as instruments of power; and the legitimization of the use of food as a weapon. In 1932, for instance, Viacheslav Molotov, chairman of the USSR Council of People's Commissars, stated that "even if we have to face, especially in grain-producing areas, the spectre of famine… procurement plans must be respected at all cost" (Ivnitskii 1995, 59); and in 1933 Stanislav Kosior, general secretary of the Bolshevik Party in Soviet Ukraine, said openly that hunger was being used to teach the peasants a lesson. In China slogans such as "First the centre, then the locality; first external [commitments, meaning exports], then internal" were current already in 1958; and in 1960 leaders in charge of feeding the cities and providing goods for export stated that the needs of the countryside had to give way to the interests of the state (Dikötter 134, 302; Ivnitskii 1995, 59).

In this light, one must at least reconsider the often noted and certainly existing differences between the two regimes' official relations with, and attitudes toward, their peasantries.

2. *The transformation and role of "planning."* In both countries planning targets were repeatedly and significantly raised over very short periods. The clear signal that Party cadres received from above was to rush ahead rather than pursue the equilibrium traditionally associated with planning against the vagaries of the market. The *subjective* Soviet and Chinese economic-administrative systems thus amplified, rather than neutralized, the impulses coming from above and unleashed a repeated series of crises. These crises and the need to react to them caused yet another transformation of the plan, which became a tool for imposing the state's political priorities upon the entire country and its population. Scarce resources were allocated to the sectors and groups deemed more important to the state, sentencing to misery and even death those whose importance was denied. Planning thus came to embody state hierarchization and was perhaps its most important tool. It became the very opposite of what nineteenth-century socialists had seen in it (see Brutzkus; Lewin; Wei and Yang; Osokina 1993).

3. *Dynamics.* Already by 1930 in the USSR and 1959 in China, Stalin and Mao (a few months after launching the GTP and the GLF) answered the major crises caused by the famines in their countries with retreats so as to regain control over the situation. These retreats were instrumental in the above-mentioned transformation of planning. In 1931, however, Stalin launched a new assault, based upon his conviction that the war against the peasantry had been won, and predicated upon a new, large wave of industrial investment. In Kazakhstan the situation had already precipitated a crisis in the course of that year, and by the spring of 1932 the entire country entered a new, general, and deeper crisis, which manifested itself in regional famines and a general scarcity affecting all social strata but especially the peasants. It rapidly acquired significant political overtones, such as the emerging rift between Moscow and the Bolshevik Party in Ukraine, and seemed to threaten the very existence of the Soviet regime, including in the perceptions of the Stalinist leadership. In the late summer and early autumn of 1932, Stalin therefore parried with a new, major economic retreat that involved halting industrial investment and cleansing the cities through the introduction of internal passports. However, this retreat was accompanied by the decision to use hunger in selected locations so as to regain complete political control over the countryside, first and foremost in Ukraine, which also became the target of a major wave of national and cultural repression.

Many cadres considered the major Party conference that Mao convened at Lushan in July 1959 an occasion for the consolidation of the retreat begun in the spring and for discussions of the causes of the crisis unleashed by the GLF. Only a few months earlier Mao himself had stated that "we overreached and were adventurist in a big way," adding that he had come to support "conservatism. I stand on the side of right deviation. I am against egalitarianism and left adventurism. I now represent 500 million peasants and ten million local cadres" (Bernstein 428). However, Mao interpreted the criticism that emerged at the Lushan Conference as a direct threat to his political leadership. After violently attacking and trashing Marshal Peng Dehuai, the former defense minister, Mao launched a new and bigger adventure, as if this could justify the choices of 1958.

In the summers of 1932 and 1959, at the peaks of serious crises, the two countries' paths thus diverged. In 1933 the USSR embarked upon a moderate economic course while using hunger to tame peasants, and mass starvation and repression to solve the Ukrainian problem. In 1960 a new, greater leap was officially under way in China. It would soon cause a major national catastrophe for which Mao bore personal responsibility in the eyes of key Party leaders.

4. *Harvests, state procurements, exports and the initial reactions of peasants.* An examination of these factors reveals similar trends related to the increasing of requisitions; the mechanisms and realities of seizing grain; the role and behaviours of special detachments and the methods and the violence they resorted to; the peasants' reactions to such actions; the decline in productivity; the flight from the countryside; and the centre's refusal to use central grain reserves to help famine-stricken areas except on selective occasions. Just as surprising are the similarities found in export policies focused on procuring hard currency, even in times of famine, and in the "mining" of the population's gold and hard-currency reserves via the squeezing of diaspora communities (Osokina 2009; Dikötter 76).

It must be kept in mind when reading Table 1 (below), which summarizes these trends, that China's population was four times larger than the Soviet Union's. China's per capita harvest was therefore much smaller and the position of Chinese peasants was much more vulnerable. This, at least partially, explains the much larger dimensions of the Chinese disaster. In both countries state requisitions were concentrated in the traditionally rich, grain-growing regions, causing the paradox that is typical of political famines, in which the best agricultural areas suffer most. In China, however, a major role was also played by the weakness of the transportation network, with the presence of railroads and canals becoming a major determinant of the geography of the requisitions, and hence the famines (Garnaut). In the USSR, with some exceptions (such as

Western Siberia or parts of the Volga Basin), the most important grain-producing areas happened to be non-Russian—a fact that produced special tensions. Finally, neither the USSR nor China were affected by major drought in the periods under consideration, although some Chinese regions perhaps suffered marginally from poor weather conditions in 1959 and 1960.

Table 1. Harvest, Procurements, and Grain Export: USSR, 1923-33; China, 1957-62.*

Years USSR CHINA	**Harvest** *in million tonnes* USSR CHINA	**Procurements** *% of the harvest* USSR CHINA	**Procurements** *in million tonnes* USSR CHINA	**Grain exports** *in million tonnes* USSR CHINA
1928 1957	73.8 195	14.7 24.6	10.7 48.0	0.28** 1.9
1929 1958	71.7 200	22.4 29.4	16.6 58.7	0.17 3.3
1930 1959	73-77 170	30.2-28.7 39.7	22.1 67.4	4.8 4.7
1931 1960	57-65 144	40-35.1 35.6	22.8 51.0	5.2 1.0
1932 1961	55-60 148	33.6-30.8 27.4	18.5 40.4	1.73 0***
1933 1962	70-77 160	32.4-29.5 23.8	22.7 38.1	1.68 0***

Sources: Davies, Harrison, and Wheatcroft 285; Davies and Wheatcroft; Dikötter; Graziosi 2007; Lewin 1985, 142-77; Wemheuer 2014.

*For the association of these data with mortality, see part II, section 7 below.

**2.6 in 1922-23.

***China started importing large quantities of grain in 1960.

The initial reactions of Soviet and Chinese peasants were similar. They reduced the areas under cultivation and slaughtered their animals before the kolkhozes or communes could seize them. Young males abandoned the villages en masse. Almost ten million peasants in the USSR in-migrated to the cities during the years 1930-32, and more than thirty million peasants in China did so from 1957 to 1960. Peasants and nomads also fled abroad whenever possible. For example, in 1933 some Kazakh families fled to China, whence some returned to the USSR during the years 1959-62, and Chinese peasants tried to cross to Hong Kong, Burma, or Vietnam. Alternately, they set off to supposedly better-faring areas within their country—an exodus the Soviet state firmly and efficiently opposed,

especially in Ukraine. In China such out-migration was not as aggressively confronted. The remaining poorly fed and dissatisfied workers, with fewer animals at their disposal, worked less and less productively. Harvests thus dropped (also because of the authorities' egregious mistakes), and procurement efforts met with increasing difficulties, which the Soviet and the Chinese Party-states managed with an iron and cruel hand (see part II, section 6 below).

5. *Relations with local cadres.* In spite of the pre-emptive purges conducted against "rightists," when hunger struck many Soviet and Chinese cadres sided with the peasants, and for this they were harshly repressed and (as in the USSR in 1932 and 1933) even executed. Others proved willing to fulfill the centre's wishes. At times they interpreting them in extreme ways and personally profited from the situation by abusing the extraordinary powers over the peasantry they had been granted. Although the latter category of cadres was usually preferred, thus setting in motion a process of selection favouring the cruelest and violent among them, they did not necessarily enjoy easy lives, because both Stalin and Mao repeatedly used these "bad" cadres as scapegoats to be sacrificed for their "excesses" in order to excuse the failure of policies that the leadership had initiated.

6. *Life and death in the villages.* Both the Soviet and the Chinese peasantry reacted to their states' oppression and coped with increasing misery by resorting to massive rural theft, the hiding of resources, and other such so-called "weapons of the weak." However, using Primo Levi's analysis, Dikötter has rightly noted that when the famine became really acute, these "weapons" were turned against neighbours and even family members, endangering the survival of the weakest (Dikötter 211-13). They resumed being weapons against the state only after the situation stabilized again. The heavy spell that the legacy of mass deaths cast was compounded by persisting misery and—at least in the USSR—by the increase in alcohol consumption, because the states used village stores to sell vodka in order to raise cash.

Families suffered greatly. Women, often left alone, bore the brunt of the increasingly difficult situation. In such extreme conditions, procuring food of any kind became the paramount activity. Stealing became the norm with the general collapse of moral standards; children were often abandoned; and cannibalism appeared, with rumours of human flesh being sold at markets. The eating of flesh from corpses was more widespread than killing, but there were also cases of, and trials for, "active" cannibalism. Even though typhus and other diseases (including plague) did appear, both governments proved capable of efficiently containing their bouts.

7. *Cities versus the countryside.* In both the USSR and China the cities experienced a sudden population boom, fueled by rural misery and the fact

that urban residence and industrial employment were tied to rations and to welfare, health, and education provisions, which often proved largely theoretical but which rural inhabitants were not granted even in principle. And both countries used internal passports to control rural migration.

In the USSR, however, such passports were introduced only in late 1932 (and *only* for city dwellers, thus once again discriminating against rural denizens) as one of the measures implemented to solve the crisis unleashed by Stalinist policies. The Chinese *hukou* system, although built upon Chinese traditions, was reinforced by copying Soviet legislation soon after 1949, that is, long before the crisis precipitated by the GLF. This difference in timing produced notably different consequences: Soviet peasants who fled their villages before 1933 received internal passports and were thus granted urban residence unless they belonged to one of the social and political categories that the secret section of the passport decree ordered to be removed from industrial centres. In China, however, the *hukou* was already in effect at the time of the GLF, so, as a rule, the millions of incoming peasants could not register as city inhabitants and it was therefore possible to remove them en masse in 1961 and 1962.

In both countries, the urban standards of living were much superior to the rural ones because of the states' priorities in distributing supplies, dramatically so at the peaks of the famines. Yet it would be a mistake to think that there was a transfer of wealth from the countryside to the cities, as some have maintained. The relative position of China's urban residents vis-à-vis their rural counterparts improved during the GTP and the GLF, but *only in relative terms*. Both the Soviet and Chinese workers experienced a dramatic fall in real wages and living and working conditions, and some died of hunger and exhaustion, even though—thanks to ration cards—certainly not as numerously and as frequently as village inhabitants.

8. *The production of an official lie for the outside world.* Both the USSR and China used Western journalists—most notably Walter Duranty in Moscow and Edgar Snow in Beijing—to defend the official lies covering the famines and to discredit those trying to report about hunger. Both countries also exploited the arrival of foreign dignitaries to strengthen their official messages, as confirmed by a comparison of the use they made of Édouard Herriot's visit to Ukraine in 1933 and François Mitterrand's 1961 stay in Beijing.

Both countries also enjoyed a considerable degree of success in this regard. In 1935, in their influential book *Soviet Communism: A New Civilisation*, Sidney and Beatrice Webb unconditionally praised the Soviet experiment without even mentioning the catastrophic 1931-33 famines. In 1981, in *Poverty and Famines,* Amartya Sen commended socialist China, which had "eliminated starvation," and castigated India, whose famines had

in fact been incomparably less severe (Drèze and Sen 7). (In subsequent years, however, Sen did acknowledge the Chinese famine, and his 1981 analyses proved very useful to the students of the Chinese and Soviet famines.)

9. *Minor affinities.* The long list of minor affinities can be organized according to three categories:

a) The administrative-subjective nature of the economic system.

Affinities within this category include queuing; the trading of favours and the role of personal contacts and social connections to get things; bribes and massive corruption; representatives of various firms and organizations who toured the countries trying to procure scarce goods; and the central bureaucrats' passion for quotas, rations, rationing, and so on.

b) The nature and rhythm of the two assaults.

Affinities include the emergence of shock work and of little Stalins and little Maos to whom unlimited powers were granted to accomplish specific tasks; the collapse of the transportation system under the weight of excessive demands as well as the huge waste this involved, compounded by the chaos this generated in both countries; frequent cases of mass poisoning caused by poorly prepared or stored food; the important role of rumours because of the lack of reliable information in a situation of extreme stress; and the flight of foreign specialists at the height of the crises owing to the lack of hard currency in the USSR in 1932 and to the break in Soviet-Chinese relations in China in 1960.

c) Ideology, psychology, and attitudes.

Stalin, Mao, and their companions cherished willpower and simplistic solutions and believed that reality and nature were enemies against which war was to be waged. The consequences include massive urban destruction in the capitals as well as in minor centres; the ecological disasters that have affected both countries; the consequences of the already mentioned predominance of extreme subjectivism at the top and in the provinces; and the spread of "miracle" solutions, such as Trokhym (Russian: Trofim) Lysenko's theories in the USSR and close and deep planting in China.

II. The Differences

1. *Dekulakization*—i.e., the assault launched in January 1930 against one million "kulak" families that opened Stalin's great turning point. Fearing that the peasantry could answer the seizure of the land they had conquered in 1917 by fielding peasant armies, as they had done during the civil war, Stalin's regime organized the pre-emptive mass destruction of village elites. Scores of thousands of peasants were summarily executed and almost 2.5 million were deported during the years 1930-33 alone.

In China's then recent past there was nothing comparable to the 1918-21 war between the Bolsheviks and the peasantry: the Soviet upper village stratum had been dispossessed and often liquidated, like the landlords, well before the launching of the GLF. Mao therefore had no reason to envisage a pre-emptive, mass "anti-kulak" operation. Its absence in China is also tied to the already mentioned difference in the two socialist states' relationships with their peasantries (Ivnitskii 1996; Bianco).

2. *Peasant resistance and anti-peasant mass violence.* In both countries the peasants killed their livestock, reduced their work efforts, wrote angry letters to their sons in the army, and at the peak of the famine assaulted state granaries and food convoys. In the Soviet Union, however, villagers also met collectivization and dekulakization with a strong wave of open resistance that forced Stalin to a partial retreat in March 1930. The resistance was especially intense in non-Russian areas, from the Caucasus to Central Asia and Ukraine, but also in traditional areas of peasant unrest, such as the Volga region. This resistance continued up until the spring of 1933, when it was eventually crushed by a combination of repression and hunger.

In China resistance was not entirely missing, but its scale was much smaller, also because already by 1956 about ninety-six percent of Chinese peasants belonged to kolkhoz-like collective farms. Therefore, Mao did not have to conduct his great offensive while, at the same time, imposing a system the peasants resented. Consequently, already in 1958 the "weapons of the weak" constituted the Chinese peasants' most important arsenal.

In China, while the major foci of revolt were tied to the "national question," as in 1959 Tibet, they were not directly the result of mass and overt peasant opposition to collectivization as in 1930-33 Soviet Ukraine (see Graziosi 1996; Danilov and Berelowitch; Viola; Yang 2012, 465-82; Dikötter 208-14; Grunfeld; Wemheuer 2014, 157-74).

Both Party-states brutally quelled peasant opposition. Stalin had scores of thousands of "kulaks" shot and millions deported, and the Soviet countryside became the realm of "special detachments" that savagely mistreated peasants, also on the basis of laws that punished small rural theft with years of hard labour and even death (laws that Stalin personally wrote). In China there were fewer official shootings, yet, especially in some provinces, anti-peasant violence reached extreme levels: peasants were branded with hot irons, mutilated, burned with hot water, forced to torture their own sons, to kneel on burning charcoal, or to eat their own excrement. According to Dikötter, six to eight percent of all victims of the Chinese famine, that is millions of people, were directly "tortured to death or summarily killed" by cadres and the militias. His estimate has been criticized, yet at least for some regions it is corroborated by the results of

official 1960-61 Chinese investigations. In Xinyang (Henan), for example, 67,000 of the one million famine victims were apparently killed in mass beatings, a phenomenon unheard of in the USSR (Yang 2012, 29-32, 47; Dikötter 288, 297, 300; Zhou 17-42*)*.

3. *Communes in China versus sovkhozes and kolkhozes in the USSR.* The Soviet kolkhozes of the early 1930s united on average fewer than one hundred households, and only a small fraction of the five thousand to twenty thousand households that entered the Chinese communes after 1957. The degree of collectivization in the USSR was much less intense than in China, and unlike China's communes, the kolkhozes did not have their own militias, were not able to field labour armies, and could not start major ventures like the water projects that ravaged the Chinese countryside and the lives of Chinese peasants during the GLF.

Though the peasants often despised them, the kolkhozes were not "mini-states" directly oppressing them (like Chinese communes) but rather the Soviet state's tool for seizing grain. Furthermore, the Chinese communes organized peasants into huge economic units (averaging 176 families per commune in 1957, jumping to 2,675 in 1958, only to go back to 41 families per commune in 1962), thus causing a collapse in the incentive to work and in personal responsibility.

4. *Common mess halls.* These did not exist in the kolkhozes, and peasant households thus kept some control over what food they had. Food waste—caused both by the organization of the mess halls and the irresponsible behaviours they favoured—played a much larger role in China, where 2.65 million mess halls feeding 400 million peasants were in operation by the autumn of 1958 and considerably contributed to the intensity of the famine. Significantly, the provinces with the highest concentration of mess halls were also those where the famine hit hardest, even though this may also have depended on the fact that the concentration was itself an indicator of the presence of an especially hardline local leadership (Chang and Wen; Watson).

5. *Small peasant holdings.* In the USSR, Stalin allowed peasant families to have small personal allotments" (*lichnye podsobnye khoziaistva, or LNKh*) in 1935, that is, *after* the famine. These allotments ensured the Soviet peasants' survival during the war and postwar years and survived Nikita Khrushchev's hostility to them in the 1950s. Leonid Brezhnev allowed them to be larger after 1964, but they were not liberated from the main constraints that hobbled them.

Mao allowed similar allotments soon after 1949 but suppressed them in 1958: the latter ideology-based decision deprived Chinese peasants of their most important means of surviving hard times. The reintroduction of these holdings in November 1960 marked the end of the GLF. While

opposing their growth, Mao did not abolish them during the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, and in the late 1970s Mao's successor, Deng Xiaoping, could thus start his reforms by greatly expanding the role and surface area of these allotments.

6. Difficulties and crisis at the centre and the periphery (famine and nationality). The Stalinist assault caused a general crisis in the USSR, where village life became terrible and urban residents also suffered. Nonetheless, the system did not break down, and the centre was able to keep some control over the situation even in 1932 and 1933, when, after a few weeks of uncertainty in September and October 1932, Stalin was able to manipulate the widespread hunger so as to reach his political aims.

In China, even though certain regions suffered more than others, after the Party's Lushan conference the entire country was on the verge of collapse. Mass-hunger-related deaths in China were *not* the result of a *conscious decision to use hunger as a weapon,* as in 1933 Ukraine or the Kuban. Rather, they were the undesired outcome of mistaken and fanatical policies, as had been the case, albeit on a much lesser scale, in the USSR up until the autumn 1932 (except in Kazakhstan, which did experience a major breakdown in 1931 and 1932).

The relationship between famine and nationality was very different. In the USSR the Holodomor and the Kazakh tragedy were responsible for approximately eighty percent of the victims, and other regions with substantial non-Russian populations, such as the Kuban and the Northern Caucasus, greatly suffered. In comparison with China, the pan-Soviet famine was a relatively "mild" phenomenon, which became extremely acute in specific republics and regions because of political decisions that caused an altogether different kind of tragedy, especially in Ukraine. In Kazakhstan, Moscow's choices also played a crucial role, but in a different way. The still then autonomous republic in the RSFSR and its indigenous population, in particular, were considered relatively insignificant and were thus left to their own devices (Graziosi 2015).

In China, however, ethnic Chinese peasants constituted the overwhelming majority of the victims, and the famine was a Chinese national tragedy. In fact, "the multi-ethnic borderlands of China, including Tibet, much of Xinjiang, and Inner Mongolia" appear to have "been spared the worst of the famine" (Garnaut 337).

7. *Mortality peaks.* There were approximately seven million excess deaths in the USSR during the years 1930-34. Of these deaths, 5.5 million were concentrated during well-defined periods in Ukraine and Kazakhstan. Peak mortality in the USSR thus appears the direct result of central political decisions, both in Ukraine, which was purposely hit in November and December 1932, and in Kazakhstan, where Moscow did not "want" a famine

but where the choice to take away the nomads' herds in 1931 in order to feed the republic's predominantly Slavic cities played a crucial role.[2]

The estimates of the Chinese famine's victims vary from eighteen to more than forty million, in part because of the existence of conflicting and imprecise sets of figures. All authors maintain, however, that the deaths reached a peak in 1960. According to Bianco, out of 34.5 million deaths, 17 million (50 percent) died in that year, 8.5 million (25 percent) in 1961, 4 million (12.5 percent) in 1959; 3.35 million in 1962, and less than a million in 1958.[3]

Contrary to the Soviet case, where conscious central political decisions played a crucial role, the sharp regional variations in China seem to have depended more on the personal behaviour and choices of provincial leaders. And if—as we already know—in both countries the richest grain-producing areas, where requisitions were concentrated, suffered the most, the poorer Chinese infrastructural situation made the presence of railroads and channels a crucial variable in determining the geography of the famine.

8. *The Party.* In both the USSR and China, moderate "rightist" cadres were purged before the launch of the 1929 and 1958 assaults, and then repeatedly after them. Yet the Chinese Party's central leadership proved not so dependent on Mao as did their Soviet counterparts on Stalin after the taming of opposition in the 1920s. The nature of the Syrtsov-Lominadze and other Party affairs indicates that a stance such as Peng Dehuai's and of other important leaders at the Lushan Conference was unthinkable in the USSR during the 1930s. The fact that the most significant Party opposition to Stalin came in 1932 and 1933 from the Ukrainian leadership, whose most representative figure, Mykola Skrypnyk, committed suicide in July 1933, is further proof of the much greater importance of the national question in the Soviet Union. And while it is true that in the USSR an important member of Stalin's inner circle, Sergo Ordzhonikidze, "repented" and questioned Stalin's policies (but not those in the countryside), internal party dissent in China rapidly grew in connection with the famine. Both Deng Xiaoping and Liu Shaoqi, who supported Mao's choices in 1958 and 1959, changed their stance in 1960 and 1961 and gained at least partial control over the Party centre for a while.

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[2] Note Plokhy; Meslé and Vallin; Rudnyts'kyi et al; Pianciola; and Panciola's and Cameron's articles in this volume.

[3] See Bianco's article in this volume; Bernstein; Dikötter 324-34; Becker 266-74; Yang 394-430.

There were also similarities: little Stalins and little Maos emerged in both countries, and both parties saw their memberships increase, demonstrating that power and privilege attract in times of stress as well. However, the most striking similarity is perhaps to be found in the personal reaction to the crisis of some top Communist leaders. Skrypnyk's and Ordzhonikidze's suicides, or Lavrentii Beria's, Georgii Malenkov's, and Khrushchev's regeneration as reformers, on the one hand, and the evolution of Peng Zhen, Liu, and Deng, or the transformation of Zhao Ziyang from an oppressor of peasants in 1959 into China's most radical reformist leader of the 1980s, on the other, indicate that remorse has been a crucial component of the Communist leaderships' experience.[4]

9. *Stalin versus Mao.* Stalin and Mao did share important personal features: both were talented politicians capable of exercising almost unlimited influence over their closest collaborators; both preferred informal ways of ruling and used personal cults to strengthen their power; and both were ready to transform former partners and henchmen into scapegoats, did not suffer any opposition, and were personally cruel and enjoyed revenge. Both had no qualms and stopped at nothing.

At the same time, they were very different despots, with different cultures, psychologies, and attitudes. Stalin was a self-educated thinker with an extremely rational, if obsessive-compulsive, disposition, who read Marx and Lenin and micromanaged the policies he conceived. Mao preferred Chinese classics over Marxism and Western political thought, which he basically ignored; was inclined to speculation and powerful flights of fancy; disliked micromanagement; and was much more of a populist than Stalin.

Both Stalin and Mao received ample information on the famines in their countries. Stalin had much better control over their development: in the autumn of 1932 he could thus decide to use famine in selected places to win his battle while denying the famine's existence and forbidding the use of the very term even in private communications. Mao received abundant news about the catastrophic consequences of his policies in 1958 and 1959 but not in the months after the Lushan Conference, when cadres feared to talk and Mao denied the countryside's realities.

However, given what Mao already knew, his decision at the conference to resume and strengthen his GLF policies in order to defeat his enemies in the Party makes him as responsible for the 1960 catastrophe as Stalin is for

[4] See the books of Khlevniuk, Zhao, and, for a similar process of personal regeneration, Dubček's and Yakovlev's memoirs.

the Holodomor. Yet Stalin "willed" the latter and won because of it. In contrast, Mao and the Chinese Party centre were overwhelmed and dejected by the information that reached them in the spring and summer of 1960. A depressed Mao then faced his Party's and comrades' growing criticism.

10. *Coming out of the crises and their legacies.* Stalin's 1933 victory and Mao's 1961 partial defeat determined two very different ways of coming out of the respective crises. In the USSR, where, but for Ukraine and Kazakhstan, the situation was very bad but not catastrophic, with the 1935 compromise that granted Soviet peasants their small family allotments, Stalin stabilized the new collective-farm system. The latter represented a negative asset for the country up until its collapse, but it also guaranteed its inefficient survival for several decades. At the same time, the parallel consolidation of Stalin's personal grip on power was sanctioned by the 1936 Soviet Constitution and by the great trials and secret mass operations of 1937-38 (the "Great Terror").

In China the 1960 catastrophe called for radical reforms (culminating in Liu Shaoqi's three freedoms and one guarantee) and the implicit condemnation of Mao. The despot, who could not but comply at first, was soon able to put a stop to (but not completely reverse) the reforms that had helped the countryside recover a certain degree of stability. He then launched a new attack, the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (GPCR), which made him again the undisputed leader of the country. The Chinese economy was thus paralyzed for almost twenty years (in 1980 the peasants still made up around eighty percent of the total population and rationing was still in force), until Deng jump-started it with his reforms.

The demographic impact of famine as a percentage of the total population was similar in the two countries but more concentrated in the USSR, where Ukraine, and especially Kazakhstan, paid relatively much heavier tolls. Both the Soviet and the Chinese countryside were, however, capable of rapidly, if partially, recovering the lost demographic ground thanks to the well-known, extraordinary energy of modernizing rural societies.

11. *Dealing with the famine ("Memory").* In the USSR the famines were taboo topics for more than fifty years, and only diaspora communities, especially in North America, could commemorate and discuss the events of 1932-33. When the Soviet famines became part of the public discourse in the late 1980s, their relationship to the national question immediately came to the fore. In independent Ukraine, for example, the Holodomor (a term created during those very years) soon became a catalyst of nation building and the object of the politics of memory in Ukraine. Possibly because of the very scale of the devastation it produced, the 1931-33 Kazakh catastrophe

did not play a crucial role in public debates, but the tragedy was publicly acknowledged. In post-1991 Russia, the famine has been studied as a pan-Soviet tragedy, but it has not been much discussed and its importance and peculiarities have been downplayed. Famine research and publications have not been hindered, however, even if they have highlighted the significance of the national question.

Chinese leaders began mentioning the famine soon after Mao's death—in 1980, for instance, Hu Yaobang spoke of twenty million victims. They authorized the publication of select but important data, including census material, and rehabilitated Liu Shaoqi and Peng Dehuai. The famine, however, was generically imputed to mistakes in Party policies made in good faith. Discussions of Mao's role have been discouraged, and the Chinese diaspora communities have not assumed the major role played, for instance, by their Ukrainian counterparts (see Commission on the Ukrainian Famine; Graziosi, Hajda, and Hryn; Kul'chyts'kyi). The original, Chinese version (2008) of Yang's pioneering work about the Chinese famine (published in English as *Tombstone* [2012]), appeared in Hong Kong but has been banned in mainland China.

12. *Sources and historiography.* The incomplete but substantial opening of the central Soviet archives has significantly increased the amount of documentation that historians now have at their disposal. These include political police reports, parts of Stalin's personal correspondence, and sound statistical data (except for Kazakhstan), adding to an already rich base that includes the writings of foreign journalists, engineers, and workers; consular reports (the German, Italian, and Polish consuls' possibly being the best); and the testimonies gathered by diaspora communities, although the temporal distance from the events limits the validity of the oral-history projects that could be conducted after 1991.

Because the Chinese Communist state still exists, access to that country's central archives is very limited and Chinese statistical data are poorer and more contradictory than Soviet data. In addition, the testimonies of Soviet and East German advisers in China are not as important; and China did not have a network of consulates comparable to what existed in the USSR in the early 1930s. However, the new Chinese leaders started speaking about the famine relatively soon and did cautiously permit its study, and local archives contain descriptions of the investigations conducted during the 1961-62 reformist period. It was also

possible, though difficult given Beijing's stance, to organize good oral-history projects, and some were indeed carried out.[5]

The statist essence of the Soviet and Chinese Communist systems has made the historian's task difficult: autonomously produced sources are scarce for both countries, and scholars have had to view everything through the eyes of the state and the Party—that is, to rely on official documents, whose biases are obvious.

For these as well as ideological reasons, the histories of the Soviet and Chinese famines have generated heated debates. This was especially true during the early stages of research, which dates in both cases from the 1980s and 1990s. Slowly but surely, however, the initial, sharp controversies and at times even fierce reciprocal accusations developed into serious scholarly disagreements, even if prickly exchanges are still frequent. At times the latter have obscured what is, in my opinion, substantial agreement over what happened, while the disagreements have often reflected some of the differences I have described. The nationality factor has been, for example, at the centre of the post-Soviet debates. In China the question of the number of victims and regional variations, as well as Mao's responsibility, have generated the most heated controversies, aggravated by the poorer and more contradictory statistical documentation Chinese historians have had access to.

Conclusion

The different yet deeply related ways in which the two countries' leaderships "re-elaborated" the famine experience and the roles of Stalin and Mao in history are also notable and have had a powerful, direct impact on the study of Soviet and Chinese history as well as on the fate of the two Communist regimes.

In 1956 Khrushchev accepted, and actually extolled, Stalinism's economic and systemic legacy, of which he himself was a product, but denounced Stalin's crimes and dismantled Stalin's cult, thus undermining the USSR's prestige and Soviet Communist ideology. This was something members of the Politburo still regretted in the early 1980s. After Mao's death, Deng Xiaoping made the opposite choice, albeit unwillingly and after

[5] Because mentioning, let alone researching, the Soviet famines was forbidden in the USSR until its final, Glasnost period, there seems to be very little immediate post-famine documentation besides the 1937 and 1939 Soviet censuses.

some hesitation: he did not attack Mao while, at the same time, totally reversing Maoist economic policies.

This contradiction originated in the way the two crises were solved. Stalin's 1933 victory, later consecrated by the USSR's triumph in World War II, seemed to sanction the Soviet system, marred in the eyes of Stalin's closest collaborators by the dictator's post-1935 "folly." The catastrophic outcome of the GLF and GPCR convinced some of Mao's associates that the system he built, the policies he imposed, and even economic socialism were wrong. At the same time, however, the destabilizing consequences of the Twentieth Congress of the Chinese Party convinced Deng that political power and ideological stability were not to be questioned, but rather strengthened, especially during much needed, radical economic reforms. Thus, while rehabilitating his friends Liu Shaoqi and Peng Dehuai,[6] Deng did not discontinue the cult of Mao (Domes 127-28). In 1981 the "Mao question" was thus closed with an official assessment that blamed him for the GLF and GPCR but reaffirmed his role as the founder of modern China and a leader "whose contribution far outweighs his mistakes" ("Resolution on Certain Questions").

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[6] Peng died in 1974 after years of beatings and torture at the hands of the Red Guards. At the Party congress in 1978, Deng praised him as "courageous in battle, open and straightforward, incorruptible and impeccable, and strict towards himself."

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