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# NO GRAIN OF PITY

BY ROBERT CONQUEST

This is the first of two excerpts from Mr. Conquest’s new book, The Harvest of Sorrow: Soviet Collectivization and the Terror-Famine, published by the University of Alberta Press.

Just over 50 years ago the Ukraine and its neighbouring areas, the Don, the Volga and the Kuban - a great stretch of territory inhabited by about 40 million people - resembled a vast Belsen. One quarter of the rural population lay dead or dying, the rest in various stages of debilitation with no strength to bury their families or neighbors. As at Belsen, well-fed squads of police and government officials supervised the victims.

This was the climax of the “revolution form above,” as Josef Stalin put it, in which the Soviet leader and his associates crushed two elements seen as irremediably hostile to the regime: the Soviet peasantry as a whole and the Ukrainian nation in particular.

Stalin’s campaign had begun in 1929. Although the Ukraine was under Communist control, the population was unreconciled to the system. Historically, Ukrainians are an ancient nation which has survived terrible calamities. They have their own language, their own culture and a cementing history of persecution.

By 1929, having outwitted and crushed the right wing of the Communist Party, Stalin was at last ready to give effect to his hostility against what he saw as centrifugal tendencies in the countryside. He began with a double-blow: dekulakization and collectivization.

Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, the father of the Soviet Union, envisioned the kulak - literally “fist” - as a rich, exploiting class against whom, after the removal of the landlords proper, peasant hatred could be equally directed. A kulak was a village money-lender and mortgager, of whom there was usually one in a village or group of villages. Any rich peasants might make an occasional loan, indeed, would be expected to. Only when money-lending became a major source of income and of manipulation was he seen as a kulak by the villagers.

In practice, then, dekulakization meant the killing or deportation to the Arctic of millions of peasants with their families - in principle the better-off, in practice the most influential and most resistant to the party’s plans.

Collectivization, the second measure, meant the effective abolition of private property in land, ad the concentration of the remaining peasantry in collective farms under party control.

Stalin seems to have realized that only mass terror throughout the body of the nation - that is, the peasantry - could really reduce the country to submission. In 1932-33, accompanied by an attack on all Ukrainian cultural and intellectual centres and leaders, as well as on the Ukrainian churches, came what may be described as a terror-famine. It was inflicted on the collectivized peasants by setting grain quotas far above the possible, while removing every handful of food and preventing outside help - even from other areas of the Soviet Union - from reaching the starving.

Nationalism was blamed explicitly for the supposed contumacy of the Ukrainian peasants in not surrendering grain they did not have, all of which was in accord with Stalin’s dictum that the national problem was in essence a peasant problem. In fact, one of the aims of collectivization in the Ukraine had been stated officially as “the destruction of Ukrainian nationalism’s social base - the individual land-holdings.” The Ukrainian peasant thus suffered in double guise, as a peasant and as a Ukrainian.

In normal circumstances, the Ukraine and the North Caucasus provide half the Soviet Union’s total marketable grain. In the good harvest of 1930, the Ukraine’s share was 7.7 million tons (33 per cent). In 1931, the same 7.7 million tons was demanded of the Ukraine out of a harvest of only 18.3 million tons: that is, 42 per cent. Only seven million tons were actually collected. Thus, what amounted to a famine was affecting the Ukraine in the late spring of 1932.

In July of that year, the vital decisions were taken that led to the holocaust of the next eight monts. Stalin again ordered a delivery target of 7.7 million tons out of a total harvest that collectivization and poor weather had reduced to 14.7 million tons, two-thirds of that of 1930. It was obvious that the proposed levels of requisition were not merely excessive but impossible. After considerable argument, the Ukrainians managed to get the figure reduced to 6.6 million tons, but this too was far beyond the feasible.

The position was bad in July, 1932, but it was to grow worse. The first procurements were carried out in August, and in many areas, by great effort, the targets were met. This virtually exhausted the countryside. From then on, the inhabitants of the 20,000 villages of the Ukraine awaited an even more menacing future.

On Oct. 12, 1932, two senior Russian apparatchiks - A. Akulov, who had been deputy head of the OGPU (Stalin’s secret police), and M. M. Khatayevich, who had been prominent in Stalin’s collectivization of the Volga - were sent from Moscow to strengthen the local party. At the same time, a second procurement was announced, though there was now almost nothing available.

By Nov. 1, the delivery plan had been fulfilled only to the level of 41 per cent and people were already dying. Far from relaxing its demands, Moscow launched into a crescendo of terror by hunger.

A decree passed the previous August had ordered that all collective farm property such as cattle and grain should henceforth be considered state property, “sacred and inviolable.” Those guilty of offences against the decree were to be considered enemies of the people, to be shot unless there were extenuating circumstances, when the penalty must be imprisonment for not less than 10 years, with confiscation of property.

From August 1932, there was a great increase in the extent and severity of the law and its enforcement. From the court in Kharkov alone, 1,500 death sentences were reported in one month. In town and village, officially encouraged brutality flourished.

One peasant was shot for possession of 25 pounds of wheat, gleaned in a field by his 10-year-old daughter. A woman was sentenced to 10 years for cutting 100 ears of ripening corn from her own plot a fortnight after her husband had died of starvation. In the village of Mala Lepetykha, peasants were shot for eating a buried horse.

Some party activists, even ones with bad personal records, tried to get fair treatment for the peasantry. One activist explained: “In some cases they would be merciful and leave some potatoes, peas, corn for feeding the family, but the stricter ones would make a clean sweep. They would take not only food and livestock, but ‘all valuables and surpluses of clothing,’ including icons in their frames, samovars, painted carpets and even metal kitchen utensils that might be silver - and any money they found stashed away.”

In the larger villages, where such things could be better concealed, women would be procured for the party officials by their need for food. At the district level, there was even luxury. A dining hall for party officials in Pehrybyshcha is described: “Day and night it was guarded by militia keeping the starving peasants and their children away from the restaurant… In the dining room, at very low prices, white bread, meat, poultry, canned fruit and delicacies, wines and sweets served to the district bosses… Around these oases, famine and death were raging.”

In many areas, brigades would now make complete formal searches every couple of weeks, and not to be in a starving state was to be the object of suspicion. The activists would then make an especially careful search, assuming some food had been hidden.

One activist, after searching the house of a peasant who had failed to swell up, finally found a small bag of flour mixed with ground bark and leave, which he then poured into the village pond. There are a number of reports of brutal brigadiers who insisted on carrying the dying as well as the dead to the cemetery to avoid the extra trip, and of children and old people lying in the mass graves, still alive, for several days.

But one activist recalls: “With the rest of my generation, I believed firmly that these ends justified the means. Our great goal was the universal triumph of communism, and for the sake of that goal everything was permissible - to lie, to steal, to destroy the hundreds of thousands and even millions of people, all those who were hindering our work or could hinder it, everyone who stood in the way. With the others I emptied out the old folks’ storage chests, stopping my ears to the children’s crying and the women’s wails. For I was convinced that I was accomplishing the great and necessary transformation of the countryside.”

As the winter of 1932 wore on, famine in the Ukrainian countryside grew steadily worse. On Nov. 20, a Government decree withheld the distribution of any grain at all to peasants in payment for their work on collective farms until Stalin’s grain delivery quota had been met.

Villages that could not meet the demands were literally blockaded. A month later, a list was published of whole districts “to which supplies of commercial products have been halted until they achieve a decisive improvement fulfilment of grain collective plans.” Inhabitants of these blockaded districts were deported en masse to the north.

As the Government’s brigades of thugs and idealists probed houses and yards for grain in the later months of 1932, the peasants invented methods of finding and preserving something to eat.

There were public attacks on hiding grain in the straw by inadequate threshing, which took place on a number of collective farms. If the peasant took his grain to the local nationalized mill, it would got to the Government, so local artisans built hand mills. Party newspapers reported that they were discovered by the hundred - 200 in one district, 75 in one month in another. When they were found, maker and user were both arrested. With or without such implements, extraordinary “bread” was made - for example, sunflower oil cake soaked in water, with millet and buckwheat chaff and a little rye flour to hold it together.

There were local rebellions in the Ukraine throughout the winter and spring. The peasants were usually infuriated into revolt because there was grain available, often within miles of where they starved. Not all the grain was exported or sent to the cities or the army. Local granaries held reserves for emergencies such as war: the famine itself was not sufficient occasion for their release. Food available on the spot but denied to the starving constituted an unbearable provocation - particularly when grain and potatoes were piled up in the open and left to rot. In the Lubotino area, several thousand tons were held in a field surrounded by barbed wire. When they began to go bad, they were transferred from the Potato Trust to the Alcohol Trust, but were left in the fields until they were useless even for that.

At the height of the famine, in the spring of 1933, peasants in Mikolaiv province attacked an already-rotting dump of grain and were machine-gunned by the guards of OGPU. In Poltava province, villagers looted a grain warehouse but some, too weak to carry the corn home, died on the way back, and the rest were arrested the next day. Many were shot, the rest given sentences of between five and 10 years.

At the beginning of 1933, a third grain levy was announced and a further assault on the now non-existent reserves of the Ukrainian peasantry took place. People had been dying throughout the winter, but death on a mass scale really began in March, 1933.

“People had swollen faces and legs and stomachs… and they ate anything at all,” one observer wrote. “They caught mice, rats, sparrows, ants, earthworms. They ground up bones into flour, and did the same with leather and shoe soles; they cut up old skins and furs to make noodles of a kind, and they cooked glue. And when the grass came up, they began to dig the roots and eat the leaves and the buds; they used everything there was; dandelions, and burdock, and bluebells, and willow root, and sedums and nettles.”

Murder became commonplace. In the village of Bilka, Denys Ischenko killed his sister, his brother-in-law and their 16-year-old daughter in order to obtain their 30 pounds of flour. Ischenko also murdered his friend, Petro Korobeynyk, who was carrying four loaves of bread he somehow obtained in the city. There are innumerable reports of suicide, almost invariably by hanging; mothers frequently put their children out of their misery.

The most horrifying result was cannibalism. “Some went insane,” wrote novelist Vasily Grossman. “There were people who cut up and cooked corpses, who killed their own children and ate them. I saw one. She had been brought to the district centre under convoy. Her face was human, but here eyes were those of a wolf. These are cannibals, they said, and must be shot.”

But not all were shot. In the late 1930s, 325 cannibals - 75 men and 250 women - were reported to be still serving life sentences in Baltic-White Sea Canal prison camps.

Driven by desperation, large numbers of those who could still move left the villages. If they could not reach the cities, they hung around the railway stations. If unable to reach the stations, they went to the railway lines and begged for bread from the passing trains. Even skilled workers in Ukrainian cities found themselves existing on black bread, potatoes and salt fish. As early as the summer of 1932, Kiev office workers’ daily bread ration of one pound had been cut in half, while industrial workers’ rations were reduced from two pounds to 1½ pounds.

At the bread shops, there were line-ups more than 400 metres long, the people so weak that they were able to stand only holding on to the belt of the person in front. Each would receive from less than a pound to less than half a pound of bread, the last few hundred perhaps getting nothing but tickets of chalked numbers on their hands to present the next day.

The peasants flocked toward the cities to join these line-ups, to buy from those who had managed to get bread there or simply under vaguely understood compulsion. Although road block and controls were set up to keep them out, many managed to get through. In the towns, eerie scenes took place. People hurried about their affairs in the normal way, although “there were starving children, old men, girls, crawling about them on all fours,” hardly able to beg, mainly ignored.

In Kiev, Kharkov, Dnipropetrovsk and Odessa it became routine for the local authorities to go round the town in the early morning, clearing up the corpses. In 1933, about 150 dead bodies a day were gleaned in the streets of Poltava.

## A problem for the powers that be

The soviet intelligentsia generally took two contrary views of the peasantry. On one hand, they were the People incarnate, the soul of the country, suffering, patient, the hope of the future. On the other, they appeared as the “dark people,” backward, mulish, deaf to argument, an oafish impediment to progress. There were elements of truth in both views, and some of the country’s clearest minds saw this. In the nineteenth century, writer Alexander Pushkin praised a peasant’s good qualities, such as industry and tolerance. Soviet memorist Nikitenko called him “almost a perfect savage” and a drunkard and a thief into the the bargain, but added that nevertheless “incomparably superior to the so-called educated and intellectual. The muzhik (peasant) is sincere. He does not try to seem what he is not.”

Philosopher Alexander Herzen held, if rather sanguinely, that intermuzhik agreements needed no documents, and were rarely broken. In the peasant’s relationship to the authorities, on the other hand, his weapon was deceit and subterfuge, the only means available to him - and he continued to use it in Communist times, as can be seen in the work of all schools of Soviet writers from Mikhail Sholokhov to Alexander Solzhenitsyn.

But for the Utopian intellectual, it was one or the other, devil or angel. The young radicals of the 1870s, by the thousands, “went to the people” - stayed for months in the village and tried to enlist the peasants in a socialist and revolutionary program. This was a complete failure, producing negative effects on both sides. Bazarov, the hero of Ivan Turgenev’s Fathers and Sons, gives some of the feeling: “I felt such hatred for this poorest peasant, this Philip or Sidor, from whom I’m to be ready to jump out of my skin, and who won’t even thank me for it.” Even Bazarov didn’t suspect that, in the peasants’ eyes, he was “something of a buffooning clown.”

But as regards the “backward” peasantry, one now finds expressions of hatred and contempt among the Marxist, and especially among the Bolshevik, intellectuals going far beyond Marxist theoretical disdain; and one can hardly dismiss this is in accounting for the even that followed the October Revolution.

The townsman, particularly the Marxist townsman, was not even consistent in his view of what was wrong with the peasantry, varying between “apathetic” and “stupidly greedy and competitive.” Playwright and social critic Maxim Gorky, giving a view shared by many, felt that “the fundamental obstacle in the way of Russian progress toward Westernization and culture” lay in the “deadweight of illiterate village life which stifles the town,” and he denounced “the animal-like individualism of the peasantry and the peasant’s almost total lack of social consciousness.” He also expressed the hope that “the uncivilized stupid, turgid people in the Russian villages will die out… and a new race of literate, rational energetic people will take their place.”

The founder of Russian Marxism, Georgi Plekhanov, saw them as “barbarian tillers of the soil, cruel and merciless, beasts of burden whose life provided no opportunity for the luxury of thought.” Karl Marx had spoken of “the idiocy of rural life,” a remark much quoted by Vladimir Lenin. (In its original context it was in praise of capitalism for freeing much of society from this “idiocy.”)

Lenin himself referred to “rural seclusion, unsociability and savagery.” In general, he believed the peasant “far from being an instinctive or traditional collectivist, is in fact fiercely and meanly individualistic.” While, of a younger Bolshevik, Nikita Khrushchev tells us that “for Stalin, peasants were scum.”