

Books give insight on Ukraine famine horrors

It was certainly one of the great tragedies of the 20th century. And yet, for the most part, it remains a hidden chapter of history. From 1929-1933 the Soviet Communist Party systematically effected the annihilation of the peasantry of the Ukraine. It did so in a two-fold process, which involved the dekulakization of the population, a program designed to destroy the wealthier peasants by death or deportation, and collectivization, the elimination of private property and concentration of all land into state-run farms.

The true horror inflicted on the peasants came after dekulakization and collectivization, though. Beginning in 1932, the U.S.S.R. imposed a man-made famine on the Ukraine. By setting unattainable grain quotas for the collectives and cutting off access to all other sources of sustenance, the government made the region a place where death by starvation was an omnipresent specter. It then compounded the effects of its actions by concealing the famine from the outside world and preventing any relief from reaching the dying peasants.

Over the past two years, two strikingly different works on collectivization and the Ukrainian famine have been published in the United States. Robert Conquest's *The Harvest of Sorrow* is a comprehensive history of the famine, actually ranging as far back as the October Revolution. Miron Dolot's *Execution by Hunger*, on the other hand, is a remembrance of the famine, told by a man who was a young boy when the whole process began and who, rather miraculously, survived it.

If Dolot is recording, it would seem that Conquest, as a historian, should attempt to go beyond what happened and try to explain why it did so. It is unfortunate that he does not, that he seems more interested in deploring than understanding. "The Harvest of Sorrow" is meticulously researched, and Conquest thoroughly establishes the facts of the famine. But the work

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is so blatantly anti-Soviet in tone that much of his argument is lost. It is as if Conquest had begun with the premise that Stalin was inherently evil, and all his conclusions follow from that.

The effect of this attitude on Conquest's work cannot be overestimated. This book is, in some sense, an imprecation hurled across the ages at Stalin. But Conquest is not content to leave it at that. Instead, he links the current Soviet regime to the horrors of the 1930's. In his words, which speak for themselves, "... The present rulers of the U.S.S.R. remain and ostentatiously so — the heirs and accomplices of the dreadful history recounted in this book."

Leaving that conclusion to stew in its own juices, "the dreadful history" had roots extending back to 1917. But nominally, it began, in 1929, as a means of improving agricultural production after a very real grain shortage the year before. The state linked dekulakization and collectivization, and the two programs became seen as integral parts of each other. This was not a necessary connection, as either process could have been carried out in theory without the other. But in practice, the elimination of the kulaks as a social class encouraged farmers to join the collectives, as they saw that they could only bring harm upon themselves if they continued to improve their economic well-being.

It is perhaps inaccurate to characterize the kulaks as members of a particular class. The word "kulak" (kurkul in Ukrainian) originally meant the village usurer. Its definition was therefore specific. But during the years following 1917, "kulak" was politically deconstructed by the state. Eventually, the term lost all meaning except that which the

Party gave it. A poor but church-going peasant could be termed a kulak, as could anyone who opposed collectivization. Dolot writes that in his village a tin roof was enough evidence to brand a farmer. Kulak was thus changed from an economic to a political classification.

In any case, on December 27, 1929, Stalin announced the goal of the "liquidation of the kulaks as a class." About a month later, a Party resolution divided the kulaks into three groups. The first, who were to be shot outright or imprisoned, were the wealthiest and most hostile. The second group, including the families of those in the first, were to be deported. The third group, classified as "loyal", were to undergo at least partial expropriation and moved out to other areas within the Ukraine.

The point was not simply to wipe out the kulaks, though. It was also to establish a form of class warfare in the villages, to turn the poorer peasants against the wealthier. Thus, Dolot writes of the first meeting of the village Hundred (the Hundred refers to a new village administrative unit introduced by the Party). A propagandist got up and began to speak.

"The time had come, he said, when the villagers could redress their wrongs. He called on the poor farmers to have no mercy on the kurkuls (kulaks), and, what struck us most, he called on us to destroy them. Killing the rich, he declared, was the only way for poor farmers to attain a better and more prosperous life."

This attempt to begin internecine war among the villagers failed, on the whole. The lack of certainty about what constituted a kulak and the peasants' resentment of the Party's intrusion into their lives combined to curb any potential anger toward these illusory kulaks. Nevertheless, millions of kulaks were either murdered or deported, many of the latter eventually perishing in the Siberian taiga or in the Archangel snow.

Those peasants who evaded the

charge of kulak soon found themselves subjected to a different fate and saw their lives radically transformed. In January 1930, the Party embarked on a program of crash collectivization. Twenty-five thousand of its most loyal and active members, the Thousanders were given a two week course and then sent out to different localities to enforce compulsory collectivization. The pretense of voluntary entry into the kolkhozes (collective farms) soon vanished.

The crash collectivization had disastrous effects. Land and livestock were expropriated from the peasants, to be governed by the kolkhoz, but agricultural production did not rise. The questionable economic superiority of the kolkhozes over small farms was eviscerated by the farmers' unwillingness to work, and was compounded by the fact that when confronted by the prospect of collectivization, many peasants slaughtered their livestock. In the Ukraine, 48 percent of the cattle were lost, with far-reaching consequences.

In March of 1930, Stalin published his article, "Dizzy from Success," which criticized the excesses some Party officials had committed and reemphasized the voluntary nature of the collectives. When this message reached the villages, riots erupted and farmers tried to take back their horses and cattle. But although Stalin's article signaled a change in tactics, the strategy remained the same. The peasants were to be collectivized, sooner or later.

"Sooner" became two years, but in that period the independent Ukrainian farmer was made extinct. Pressure in the form of propaganda and excessive taxation continued, and the farmer who refused to join always risked dekulakization. The grain tax became a particularly efficacious means of changing farmers' minds. As long as individual farming was more profitable than working on the collective, there was no reason to join the kolkhoz. The Soviet answer was not make the

kolkhoz better, but to make the individual farm worse.

And yet forcing peasants into the kolkhoz simply made them resentful and unwilling to work. Although the amount of grain procured from the Ukraine increased from 1929 to 1932, that was less the result of a rise in agricultural production than of excessive demands on the part of the government. As grain procurements increased, the amount left to the peasants became smaller and smaller, as did their incentive to work.

Dolot writes: "Our village was completely collectivized sometime at the beginning of 1931. But this early completion of collectivization did not mean that our villagers accepted the system of collectivized agriculture willingly. They never did. ... As one would expect under such circumstances, our villagers had no interest in working in the collective farm. Consequently, a large portion of the crops went unharvested."

It should be obvious that the conditions for famine were present by the end of 1931. Successively extraordinary grain quotas had reduced the peasantry to a subsistence existence. The effects of the enforced collectivization had reduced the harvest for 1932 to just two-thirds of that of 1930 (a mild drought may also have had some effect.) And yet, in July of 1932, Stalin ordered a delivery goal of 7.7 million tons, the same target as that of 1930 and 1931. Dolot writes, "Moscow's demand to deliver the same grain quota in 1932 as in previous years was not only impossible, but promised to be catastrophic."

The catastrophe ensued soon after the new grain quotas were instituted. For eight interminable months starvation walked the Ukrainian countryside, claiming whole villages as victims. And then, suddenly, it was gone. Farmers were allowed back into the collectives, the grain demands ceased, and food became available. The havoc wreaked, though, was irreparable.

That havoc, that pain, is at the heart of Dolot's story. It is in many ways reminiscent of Elie Wiesel's "Night," pervaded with that same, absolute, inescapable sense of death and of youth confronted with life in its ultimate harshness. Dolot's dedication is thus "to those Ukrainian farmers who were deliberately starved to death during the Famine of 1932-33, my only regret being that it is impossible for me to fully describe their sufferings."

Dolot's greatest feat is not his description of the pain of the farmers, although the anguish in his words is palpable. The triumph of his book is the dignity he brings to the farmers, as they attempt to hold on to something in the face of the destruction of all they know.

This dignity was not a trite acceptance of their fate, and Dolot does not paint a pretty picture of the depths people reached in their struggles to survive. But even in that struggle something endured, a dignity which can be seen in the emphasis the peasants placed on burying all the dead, in the care which with they dressed themselves before they died. And it is a dignity which haunts the empty villages, which goes beyond the death, beyond the night.

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