

1987

Book Review: *The Harvest of Sorrow: Soviet Collectivization and the Terror-Famine*

Edward Cole

Grand Valley State University

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/gvr>

Recommended Citation

Cole, Edward (1987) "Book Review: *The Harvest of Sorrow: Soviet Collectivization and the Terror-Famine*," *Grand Valley Review*: Vol. 2: Iss. 2, Article 19.

Available at: <http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/gvr/vol2/iss2/19>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Grand Valley Review by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.

EDWARD COLE

The Harvest of Sorrow: Soviet Collectivization and the Terror-Famine

Robert Conquest, *The Harvest of Sorrow: Soviet Collectivization
and the Terror-Famine*. Oxford: University Press, 1986.

The weather had been beautiful, and the regime's project of liquidating small-scale peasant agriculture in favor of the more productive collective farm was complete. But something was terribly wrong in the Ukraine, the breadbasket of the Soviet Union. Ivan Stadnyuk described it in retrospect:

The early autumn of 1932 in Kokhanivka was not the same as other autumns.

There were no pumpkins hanging their weary heads down the wattle fences to the street. There were no wheat and ripe ears left on the stubbles for the hens.

The reeking smoke of home-distilled vodka did not belch from the chimneys of the huts. Nor were other signs visible that normally betokened the quiet flow of peasant life and the calm expectation of winter that comes with prosperity.

After the cadres and activists made off with the final, devastating, forced grain requisition, the Ukrainian men slaughtered their livestock down to the last cow and pig. Yet their horses they did not kill, but freed. They did not release the horses with any thoughts of recapture in the spring, for without seed there would be no planting, but because the beasts had shared in the hopeless labor of the past year. Soon the steppes of the dying Ukraine thundered to the hooves of great herds of liberated horses.

Where their men had failed, the Ukrainian women often succeeded. Not since the ancient fables of the Amazons had anyone imagined anything like the fury of the *banski bunt*, the women's rebellions, which overcame the resistance of the most hardened police soldiery, the cruelest activists. Yet in the end the greatest and noblest acts of these peasant women were those of love and martyrdom, of seeing their emaciated families out of this life, of dying in the streets of pitiless towns, their arms embracing their last living babes.

There are many such moving tales to be gleaned from the pages of Robert Conquest's *Harvest of Sorrow*, arguably the most important book of modern history published in the past year. As its title indicates, this is not a book for the sentimental, or for those who prefer to forget or ignore the basic realities of the Soviet Union.

Conquest, philosopher and poet, but above all, historian, has set himself the unenviable task of explaining and judging what many consider to have been the greatest genocidal crime of our tormented century. For, in the author's words, fifty years ago, the Ukraine, a nation larger than Germany and as populous as France, "Was like one vast Belsen." Of the, conservatively estimated, 11 million peasant deaths attributable to Communist policies between 1930 and 1937, at least 7 million were suffered by Ukrainians and their immediate neighbors as a result of the deliberate, state-sponsored famine of 1932-1934.

How this came to be, why it happened, is a question of such magnitude, and its source documents, understandably, so well guarded, that the task of answering it almost seems impossible. And to be sure, few have felt equal to the task. Nevertheless, thanks to the efforts of a handful of devoted scholars working, not only to surmount the obvious obstacles, but also against the current of mainstream academic prejudice, we are now in a position to attempt meaningful explanation of this terrible phenomenon.

The father of the Soviet Union, V. I. Lenin, is represented as one of history's great victors. Yet it is often forgotten that he had to pay heavy prices for most of his triumphs. In 1918, in order to live to fight another day, Lenin, by sheer force of will, compelled the Communist Party to surrender the greatest part of Russia into the hands of Imperial Germany by means of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. And, one by one, vast provinces, Russia's most European and most productive, tore free from Soviet control: Poland, Finland, the Baltic States, and the Ukraine declared themselves sovereign and independent. Of these lost provinces, the Ukraine, rich in all resources, but especially in food, proved to be vital to Soviet survival, and Lenin never gave up on it. It took three major political and military campaigns before the Kremlin was able to subdue the Ukrainians, and in the end Lenin had to allow ascendancy to native, nationalistic elements within the Ukrainian Communist Party. But his trials were not over, for in 1921, after having defeated all their political opponents on the field of battle, the Russian Communists were threatened by destruction at the hands of an enraged and militant peasantry, some 80% of the population, who at last had had enough of revolutionary utopianism and brutality. Again, Lenin saved the day, though at a considerable personal and political price. Expending his last energies, he convinced the Party to adopt the New Economic Policy, or N.E.P.: the Party would control the "commanding heights" of the economy (heavy industry, banking, transportation, foreign trade, etc.), leaving the rest, and in particular the peasant sector, to be governed by the detestable workings of the free market. A Party theorist of the time insightfully labelled the compromise "the peasant Brest-Litovsk."

In 1922 Lenin suffered the first of a fatal series of strokes which deprived the Party

of his leadership (he died in 1924). He bequeathed to Russia a Party and a government dominated by a weird collection of opportunists and intellectuals, espousing, amid a sea of peasants, an urban, industrial ideology. For the better part of the next decade, while the sinister Josef Stalin maneuvered himself to supreme power, the Party governed Russia like the nervous command of a mutinous ship. They loathed and feared the "rural idiots" (Marx's term) who made up their country, and above all, they hated and distrusted the semi-autonomous Soviet Ukraine. Stalin's great insight was that, once his grip on power was secure, his Party of neurotic ideologues and frustrated activists was more than ready for all-out, frenzied attack on rural idiocy, especially the rural idiocy which was the life of the peasant Ukraine.

There is simply no better way of telling what happened next than to hand the reader Conquest's book. In chapter after chapter, the complex weave of ideological psychopathy, ancient nationalistic hatred, and moral collapse is unravelled and then rewoven into a tapestry of terror and lasting historical consequence. This is not to say that everything in *Harvest of Sorrow* is a new discovery, for most of what Conquest describes, including the western reaction to the famine, was the subject of a brilliant series of articles written more than two decades ago by Dana G. Dalrymple. Conquest's study is an interpretative work rather than an exploration, and its chief accomplishment is his persuasive argument that although the Terror-Famine was related to collectivization and dekulakization, it was really a separate phenomenon: a ruthless and largely successful war to destroy, by man-made famine, the agricultural way of life and the Ukrainian nation which was its embodiment.

No book attempting such an enormous task in some 350 pages could cover everything to everyone's satisfaction, although by means of a superbly disciplined prose, devoid of the rhetoric of outrage which must have been boiling in his heart, Conquest has very nearly succeeded. To be sure, something would have been gained by noting the irony of a tourist boom which brought the greatest prewar flood of Western visitors to the Soviet Union precisely at the time of the Terror-Famine, or by some attention to American farm journals which complained bitterly of Soviet grain-dumping on the world market at the very time some 7 million were starving to death in the exporting nation. But taken together with his previous classic account of Stalin's purges (*The Great Terror*), Conquest's latest study completes an interpretation of early Soviet history which many will find persuasive. In greater clarity than ever before, one sees why the Marxist god not only failed, but came to eat its children, and finally, itself.

The thoughtful reader of *Harvest of Sorrow* will, without fail, notice dreadful similarities between Communism's greatest crime and that of National Socialism, and it is difficult to avoid the thought that the fault lay not with any particular ideology, but with

ideology itself. And just as studies of the Holocaust have given us not only an understanding of the evils of ideology, but also a tragically belated appreciation of its victims, so also the history of the Terror-Famine sharpens the sense of what was lost in the Ukraine. The Ukrainians, like all peoples, had their grievous faults. But this peasant people, which trained its blind folk to be bards, and sent them on a journey from village to village singing songs of their past, was a glorious nation in its own way. Kiev, its capital, was the mother of Christian civilization among all of the East Slavs. Unlike Russia, the Ukraine was significantly touched not only by the Renaissance, but also by the Reformation, and Kiev sent Moscow emissaries of Western culture long before Peter the Great. Though not well-developed, the Ukraine had political traditions which some believe were promising. In that sense, it was the first victim of Soviet imperialism.

Did the rest of the world, and in particular, the democratic West, understand what was happening in the Ukraine? Conquest devotes a chapter to this question, and concludes that, at best, the Western public was confused by the conflicting reports of travellers, journalists, and Soviet officials. In retrospect it is seen that the most damaging disinformation was spread by Western journalists, anxious, above all, to preserve their lucrative access to top Soviet sources; the least truthful but the most influential was Walter Duranty, whose newspaper, *The New York Times*, as recently as 1983, was still boasting of Duranty's Pulitzer Prize, awarded for "dispassionate, interpretive reporting of the news from Russia."

Finally, contemplation of the Terror-Famine, the way it has been ignored by the West, the fact that the Soviet regime to this day denies culpability and suppresses investigation, and the fantasies which some, forgetting history, entertain about Soviet liberalization, gives us a very good idea of how we would be treating the Third Reich today, had Hitler, rather than Stalin, won the Second World War.

References

- Dana G. Dalrymple, "The Soviet Famine of 1932-1934," *Soviet Studies*, vol. XV, No. 3 (January 1964).
- Dana G. Dalrymple, "The Soviet Famine: Some Further References," *Soviet Studies*, vol. XVI, No. 4 (April 1965).
- Ivan Stadnyuk, *People are not Angels*. London, 1963. The original was serialized in the Soviet journal *Neva*, in 1962.