

Le Livre Noire du Communisme on the Soviet Famine of 1932-1933¹

Chapter for Wolfgang Wippermann et al., *Roter Holocaust?*

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Le livre noire du communisme evaluates the Soviet famine of 1932-1933 as one of the most important of the crimes of communism. Stephane Courtois cites the famine in his controversial comparison that the famine death of a Ukrainian kulak's child is worth ("vaut") that of a Jewish child in the Warsaw ghetto. He asserts that communist regimes typically employed "the weapon of famine" ("l'arme de la faim") through rationing systems to distribute food according to political criteria (19). Both he and Nicolas Werth, the author of the chapter that deals specifically with the famine ("La grande famine," 178-188), interpret it as the result of an intentional policy by the Soviet regime.

The interpretation of this famine in *Le livre noire*, however, contains errors, misconceptions, and omissions significant enough to weaken if not invalidate its arguments. The present chapter analyzes and criticizes the Black Book's

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interpretation of the famine, and suggests the parameters of a more accurate and complete approach to it.

We must first note that the Black Book's authors did not agree on the basic definition of the famine. Courtois, in the introduction, refers to it as the "Ukrainian famine" and even asserts that six million "Ukrainians" died in it (19). Werth, in his chapter on the famine, notes that the famine affected many regions outside Ukraine, including even Moscow and Ivanovo regions, and that famine mortality included other groups beside ethnic Ukrainians (185,188). Most serious scholars now do not accept the view that this was exclusively a "Ukrainian" famine.²

Werth's chapter on the 1932-1933 famine begins by attributing it to exploitation of the peasantry, but ends by interpreting it as outright punishment of them for resistance to previous Soviet agrarian policies. He does not, however, acknowledge the two interpretations as distinct, let alone attempt to reconcile them.

Werth begins his first argument with the claim that the 1932-1933 famine differed from previous Russian famines because it was the result of the "military-feudal exploitation of the peasantry" imposed by collectivization, referring to the famous statement by Soviet leader Nikolai Bukharin (178). Werth here

² On recent research showing the extent of the famine, see review of Robert Conquest, *Harvest of Sorrow* by R. W. Davies, in *Detente* 9/10 (1987), 44-45; S. v. Kul'chyts'kyi, "Do otsyny stanovishcha v sil's'komu hospodarstvi USSR," *Ukrainskyi istorichnyi zhurnal*, 1988 no. 3; Mark B. Tauger, "The 1932 Harvest and the Famine of 1933," *Slavic Review* 50 no. 1, 85-86.

misunderstands Bukharin's point: Bukharin meant that Stalinism did represent a return to harsh tsarist-era policies toward the peasants. Given this general perspective, it seems most likely that Bukharin would have seen the famine as similar to tsarist-era famines.³

By "military-feudal exploitation" of the peasantry, Werth means that the regime set grain procurement quotas too high and refused to alter them.⁴ In this argument Werth implies a certain indirect intentionality, that the regime did not explicitly set out to impose a famine but imposed high procurement demands that resulted in famine. Werth does not suggest any reason why the regime might have imposed these quotas so rigidly. The term "military-feudal exploitation" implies economic or security objectives, but Werth does not expand on this implication.

Werth also does not support his claim about excessive procurement quotas with any information on actual food production, but rather with inaccurately-cited percentages of the share of procurements from the harvests (179). For example, he asserts that the procurement plan for 1932 was 32 percent greater than that of 1931. His source, however, states (in one sentence)

³ For Bukharin's use of this term at the February 1929 Central Committee plenum, see for example R. V. Daniels, *The Conscience of the Revolution* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1969), 364.

⁴ The Soviet regime acquired food supplies from the countryside in this period (through 1932) by several means, including contracts with producers, market exchange, and non-market measures that involved coercion, usually summed up under the term "procurements" [zagotovki]. The regime planned procurements based on projections of agricultural production and of the amount of grain and other food supplies needed for towns, villages, the armed forces, export, and emergency reserves.

that the Supply Commissar A. I. Mikoian had set a high procurement quota of 29 million tons of grain in early 1932, but then reduced it in spring of that year to 18 million tons.⁵ Werth thus omits the information that contradicts his argument.

The documents show that while officials did consider a high quota in early 1932, the first officially published procurement quota, issued in the well-known 6 May 1932 decree that also legalized private trade in grain, was almost 20 percent lower than that of 1931.⁶ During the subsequent procurement campaign, the regime cut procurement quotas sharply in the regions that had the most difficulty in fulfilling them, including the North Caucasus and Ukraine.⁷ Werth does not mention these measures,

⁵ "Mikoyan certainly anticipated no problems at all when, at the end of 1931, he fixed for the next campaign the fabulous target of 29.5 million tons; but later, when the situation in the countryside toward the beginning of the 1932 campaign became increasingly alarming, he would have to lower his target for grain to 18 million tons and to half that for livestock products." Moshe Lewin, "Taking Grain," in *The Making of the Soviet System* (New York, 1985), 153. Lewin's statement is not quite accurate; the decision actually was made even earlier, in May 1932, before the procurement campaign began (see below).

⁶ This law was published in the Soviet press and was seen both by Soviet citizens and foreign observers as a major concession, even a "Neo-NEP;" see Mark Tauger, "The 1932 Harvest and the Famine of 1932-1933," *Slavic Review* v. 50 no. 1, Spring 1991, 71-72. The specific grain procurement quotas were 22.4 million tons in 1931 and 18.1 million tons in 1932 for kolkhozy and non-collectivized peasants. Lewin's source is Iu. A. Moshkov, *Zernovaia problema v gody sploshnoi kollektivizatsii* (Moscow: Izd. MGU, 1966), 201.

⁷ See for example the decision in the Osobie papki Politbiuro of 17 August 1932 "to accept the proposal of comrade Stalin to decrease grain procurement plan for Ukraine by 40 millions puds [640,000 tons] as an exception for the especially suffering districts of Ukraine," and the follow up decree of 28 August 1932 that approved Ukrainian authorities' subdivision of this reduction by region, RTsKhIDNI 17. 162. 13, sessions of 25 August and 1 September 1932. Similar procurement reductions for

even though some of his sources did. In particular, Werth asserts that Molotov rejected local officials' appeals for reduced quotas (183) : according to the archives and Werth's sources, Molotov did authorize reductions. ⁸

Werth's sources, therefore, do not actually support his argument that the famine was due to "military-feudal exploitation" by rigid procurement quotas. ⁹ A more complete review of the evidence also challenges Werth's implied argument that the regime intended the procurement quotas to cause a famine: by reducing quotas Soviet leaders clearly tried to compromise between village needs and those from outside (the towns, the army, and others), an aspect of the situation which Werth does not discuss. Werth also does not examine the size of the 1932 harvest, an absolute prerequisite to any evaluation of the character of the famine. ¹⁰

Ukraine, the North Caucasus, and other regions were introduced in fall 32.

⁸ The Molotov commission to Ukraine in October-November 1932, which the authors discuss, authorized significant reductions in procurement quotas for kolkhozy, sovkhozy, and non-collectivized peasants, and these plans were broken down by region and immediately telegraphed to local officials; RTsKhIDNI fond 11 opis 26 delo 54, II. 193-201, 219-281 (protocols of the Politburo of the Ukrainian Communist Party). For evidence in Werth's sources, N. A. Ivnitiskii, *Kollektivizatsiia i raskulachivanie* (Moscow, 1994), ch. 3 pt. 3 discusses the reductions in procurement quotas.

⁹ A related point involves the authors' assertion that the regime exported 18 million quintals (1.8 million tons) of grain from the country in 1933 despite the famine. In fact only a fraction of that total, some 300,000 tons, was exported before the 1933 harvest. The rest was exported after the famine was for the most part over, in the second half of 1933 (Tauger, "The 1932 Harvest," 88).

¹⁰ The importance of harvest size for Russian famines generally is discussed in Arcadius Kahan, "Natural Calamities and Their

Werth shifts to his second explanation, that the regime intentionally imposed the famine to punish the peasants for opposition, in discussing the coercive measures that the regime applied in the summer and fall of 1932 in order to force agricultural producers to fulfill the procurement quotas. He describes a "veritable climate of war" in the countryside (180). He cites an Italian diplomatic dispatch that describes the procurement campaign in terms of the regime's attempts to gain a "victory" over the "enemy," and completes the diplomat's thought by asserting that the only way to defeat this enemy was to starve them (182). He interprets Stalin's famous letter to Sholokhov in May 1933 (185, cited in full on pp. 186-7) to mean that Stalin considered the famine to be a justifiable punishment for the peasants' "sabotage."

By the end of the chapter, Werth interprets the famine as the last episode of the conflict between the regime and the peasants that began in 1918-1922, specifically as "the second act of the antipeasant war" that began with collectivization in 1929. He emphasizes that regions of greatest resistance to the harshest Soviet agrarian policies (the requisitions of 1918-1921 and collectivization in 1929-1930) were also those most affected by the famine of 1932-1933. In particular he argues that 85 percent of the nearly 14,000 rebellions against collectivization took

Effect on the Food Supply in Russia," *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 16 (1968), 353-377, and for the 1932-1933 famine in Tauger, "The 1932 Harvest."

place in regions "punished" (quotation marks in the original) by the 1932-1933 famine (188).

This interpretation attributes the famine explicitly to the conscious intention of Soviet leaders to exact retribution for both previous and current peasant resistance. It fails, however, to account for the chronology of the famine, and the famine's effects on food consumers outside the villages.

First, if Soviet leaders wanted to punish the peasants for resistance to requisitions and collectivization, why did they wait until the latter half of 1932? The only developments in 1931-1932, in Werth's account, that could have motivated a decision to "crack down" on the peasants, were difficulties in fulfilling the 1932 procurement quota. Yet, as noted above, and despite Werth's claim to the contrary, the regime set the 1932 quota below that of 1931, and reduced it further, even at the peak of the procurement crisis. These actions suggest a policy of compromise rather than punishment. Werth does not explain why the regime procured less grain in 1932 than in 1931, despite a more violent procurement campaign in the latter year, and why procurement of a smaller quantity of food from the villages in comparison to the previous year led to a much worse famine (180-181). These considerations suggest that the country faced a problem of overall food production, a scenario that Werth does not consider.

Second, if Soviet leaders wanted to punish the peasants, why did they allow hundreds of thousands of workers and their families to die of famine, even in Moscow, and thousands of Red

Army soldiers to be deprived of food? Werth underestimates the extent of the famine (185, 188): he emphasizes that it affected regions of rebellion against collectivization, yet peasants rebelled throughout the USSR, from Belorussia to Siberia.¹¹

Other sources show that famine affected townspeople, even workers in high priority jobs who were entitled to larger rations, as well as the Red Army.¹² This was Stalin's point in his letter to Sholokhov: certain peasants, allegedly by refusing to work, were "willing to leave the workers and the Red Army without bread" (187). This evidence indicates that the famine reached even those who were consumers of the food that the regime procured, and again suggests an underlying problem of food production.

Werth's second argument, that the regime intentionally imposed the famine to punish the peasantry, again misreads sources (including Stalin's letter) and omits other aspects of the situation that do not support the argument, especially that concerning the needs of groups outside the villages. The regime's explicitly punitive actions in this crisis also cast doubt on this interpretation. In late 1932 and early 1933 the regime exiled many of the Kuban peasants whom Stalin and other officials accused of sabotage and sent peasants from provinces

¹¹ The regional distribution of these rebellions is cited from the archives in Lynn Viola, *Peasant Rebels Under Stalin* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 140.

¹² On the inadequate supplies for industrial workers, see Osokina, *Ierarkhiia potrebleniia*, ch. 1, 15-43. The Soviet military engaged in a prolonged conflict with the Supply Commissariat to obtain food and forage supplies and ultimately obtained only a portion of what it needed; see the documents in RGVA [Russian state military archive] fond 47 opis 9 delo 216.

with agrarian overpopulation and poor soils to the evacuated Kuban villages. According to that region's party secretary B. P. Sheboldaev, "We explicitly made public that malicious saboteurs, accomplices of the kulaks and those who do not want to sow would be exiled to the North region. . . . we had better give the rich land of Kuban to kolkhozniki of another region who have poor and barren land." Sheboldaev's statement suggests that leaders distinguished between punishment and the famine: they seem to have viewed the famine not as their own "weapon" but as a crisis caused partly by peasant "sabotage" or resistance and which they hoped to overcome in part with such genuine punitive measures. ¹³

Within the limitations of this chapter, one can only suggest some of the main issues that must be addressed to reach a more accurate understanding of the 1932-1933 famine.

First, an evaluation of the causes of a famine must address the issue of food production and availability in the region or country concerned. Even Amartya Sen, who argues that several recent famines took place without preceding food shortages, examines data on food production in each of them. ¹⁴ If a real shortage prevailed in a particular famine, then in principle it is difficult to call it "intentional." A severe enough shortage

¹³ E. N. Oskolkov, *Golod 1932/1933* (Rostov-na-Donu, 1991), 54-56, discusses the exile and resettlement of these Kuban villages [stanitsy]. Some villages in Ukraine and other regions were also exiled and resettled for similar reasons. For the citation, see B. P. Sheboldaev, *Stat'i i rechi 1932-1933* (Rostov-na-Donu, 1934), 67.

¹⁴ Amartya Sen, *Poverty and Famines* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981).

could make a famine inevitable. Some publications that appeared before the *Livre Noire*, including my own study based on previously secret archival data, presented evidence that suggests that the 1932 harvest was much smaller than officially admitted and was a primary cause of the famine.¹⁵ Werth does not cite these sources or show any awareness of this literature. A small harvest would mean that the Soviet peasants' crisis resembled less that of the inhabitants of the Nazi-besieged Warsaw ghetto, to use Courtois' comparison, than that of western Nigerian peasants forced by French colonial authorities to pay taxes (analogous to Soviet procurements because they obliged peasants to sell food they had produced to obtain money) despite massive crop failure, which led to a major famine in the same years as the Soviet one, 1931-1932.¹⁶

Second, a serious discussion of the famine must consider all the groups involved in the food supply system. Courtois and Werth interpret the famine, and other relations between the regime and the peasants, in isolation, as though no other sectors

¹⁵ See S. G. Wheatcroft, R. W. Davies, J. M. Cooper, "Soviet Industrialization Reconsidered: Some Preliminary Conclusions about Economic Development between 1926 and 1941," *Economic History Review* (2nd ser.), 39, 2 (1986) : 282-283; Tauger, "The 1932 Harvest;" Davies, Wheatcroft, and Mark Harrison, eds. , *The Economic Transformation of the Soviet Union 1913-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), ch. 2, 6.

¹⁶ On the 1931 famine in the Upper Volta region, see Finn Fuglestad, "La grande famine de 1931 dans l'Ouest Nigerien," *Revue française d'Histoire d'Outre-Mer* t. LXI (1974), no. 222, 18-33; mortality in this famine, partly due to French taxation policies that were more rigid than Soviet procurement policies in 1932, was in proportional terms considerably greater than in the Soviet famine, although it affected a much smaller region with a much smaller population.

of the population were involved. Werth, for example, asserts that while the state was concerned only with the procurement quotas, the peasants were concerned about survival (179: "L'enjeu était de taille: pour l'Etat le prélèvement, pour le paysan la survie. ") This view is incomplete and misleading. The regime was also concerned about survival: the procurements were the basis for the survival of the townspeople and other groups. The development of the rationing system exemplified this relationship: it was established to deal with food shortages during the grain crisis of 1928-1929, extended to more than 40 million people by 1932-1933, and eliminated after the harvests of 1933 and 1934 made it unnecessary. ¹⁷ In describing the rationing system as a means of control and punishment (19) Courtois attributes far more volition to the Soviet officials than they actually had, because he fails to consider the overall picture of food supply.

In critiquing the *Livre Noire*, I in no way seek to minimize the tragedy of the Soviet famine of 1932-1933 or the Soviet regime's responsibility for the deaths of innocent people. The regime did export food during the famine; while it cut exports drastically and stopped them early, it did not do enough. The Soviet regime faced a military threat in the Far East after the Japanese conquest of Manchuria, but in principle it should have

¹⁷ R. W. Davies, *Crisis and Progress in the Soviet Economy, 1931-1933* (London: MacMillan, 1996), 530.

been possible to do more than they did to alleviate the famine without compromising security.¹⁸

Nonetheless, responsibility is not the same as intention. The famine of 1932-1933 was an extremely complicated event, with both environmental and human causes, and with consequences that extended far beyond the "famine zone" on which Courtois and Werth focused their discussion. The Soviet regime's actions, harsh as they were, seem clearly to have been oriented toward managing an unintended economic crisis and a famine rather than toward creating such a crisis intentionally in order to punish a particular group. For these and other reasons, several scholars have argued that the famine cannot be considered in the same category of "crimes against humanity" as the Holocaust.¹⁹ This Soviet crisis resembled much more the crises faced by developing countries since World War II, who attempted to conform to inflexible demands of foreign countries and international agencies and develop industrial sectors by forcing sacrifices on their own peoples.

¹⁸ On the threat of war after the Japanese conquest of Manchuria, see G. A. Lensen, *The Damned Inheritance: The Soviet Union and the Manchurian Crises 1924-1935* (Tallahassee: Diplomatic Press, 1974), ch. 12.

¹⁹ On the comparison between the famine and the holocaust, see Alan S. Rosenbaum ed., *Is the Holocaust Unique?* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996), especially Steven T. Katz, "The Uniqueness of the Holocaust: The Historical Dimension," 19-39, and Barbara Green, "Stalinist Terror and the Question of Genocide: The Great Famine," 137-162.