

THE SOVIET FAMINE OF 1946–47 IN GLOBAL AND HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Nicholas Ganson



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Acknowledgments

As an undergraduate majoring in biology at the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Massachusetts, I had the good fortune of taking two courses with James Flynn: one was in Russian history and the other in Irish history. This experience started me on the path of a formal education in history and sparked in me an interest in famine, which figured prominently in the histories of both countries. From Holy Cross, I moved on to Boston College, where my MA adviser, Roberta Manning, introduced me to the topic of this book: the Soviet famine of 1946–47. This famine, which neither I nor seemingly anyone else in the field knew much about, immediately captured my attention, and I have since been working on making sense of this tragic historical crisis. At Boston College, a seminar on famine taught by Kevin O’Neill provided me with the tools to begin my project, which would not have come to fruition if not for the support and direction of my Ph.D. adviser at UNC-Chapel Hill, Don Raleigh: a consummate professional who epitomizes the qualities that every adviser should possess. I also benefited greatly from generous feedback on my work from Michael Hunt, as well as the other members of my dissertation committee: Peter Coclanis, David Griffiths, and Willis Brooks. Chris Ward, Jeff Jones, Rósa Magnúsdóttir, Chris Burton, Don Filtzer, James Heinzen, and Anna Kuxhausen commented on my papers at conferences and thereby helped me sharpen some of the conclusions. I would also like to acknowledge Nina Devyataykina, George Kostich, the late Raymond McNally and Father Frank Murphy, Lawrence Clifford, Jack Langer, and Marko Dumancic, who all helped me at various points along the way. I also extend my gratitude to the two anonymous reviewers of my manuscript, whose feedback helped tremendously with my final revisions. Last but not least, I would like to thank my family for their everlasting support. My parents, Jorge and Vera, not only taught me the Russian language—an indispensable tool for my research—but ignited in me a lasting interest in Russian history. My brothers, Victor and George, have been loyal friends and supporters in every way imaginable. My sons, George and

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Introduction: Famine of Victors¹

On March 17, 1946, former U.S. president Herbert Hoover (1929–1933) boarded a plane in New York departing for Paris and embarked, in his own words, on a mission to save hundreds of millions of people across Europe and Asia from hunger.² Hoover had undertaken a similar task in 1918, following World War I, making him an ideal candidate for this operation. The destruction of World War II and droughts in much of Europe and Asia in 1945 had brought many countries to the brink of famine. The American delegation chaired by Hoover, President Harry Truman's Famine Emergency Committee, focused its efforts on allocating breadstuffs from surplus countries to nations that had been ravaged by the war and were in dire need of food. Initially, the Famine Emergency Committee planned to provide relief only to Europe, but after the Indian Food Delegation requested assistance from the U.S. government, the Truman administration decided to include Asia in the committee's itinerary. As U.S. Secretary of State James Byrnes wrote, neglecting Asian countries would "probably have an adverse effect upon . . . relations with those Asiatic countries facing food shortages as severe if not more severe than those of Europe."³ The final list of needy countries was lengthy: in Europe—Great Britain, France, Holland, Belgium, Spain, Portugal, Germany, Norway, Switzerland, Italy, Austria, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Finland, Yugoslavia, Greece, and Albania; and in Asia—India, Ceylon, Malaya, China, Korea, Japan, and the Philippines.⁴

But, unlike after World War I, the USSR—the country most devastated by war—remained beyond the pale. In 1921–22, at the conclusion of the Russian Civil War, the newly founded Soviet Union had suffered a major famine, which resulted from wartime devastation, social dislocation, drought, and government requisitioning of grain. At that time, the American Relief Administration (ARA) headed by Hoover offered aid to the fledgling Soviet state in feeding its people. The ARA efforts managed to save millions of lives from 1920 to 1923; ironically, they also helped secure Bolshevik political

power.⁵ In his memoirs, Hoover explains the Famine Emergency Committee's failure to provide assistance to the USSR in 1946:

While we could classify the Soviet satellite states, we could not classify Russia proper, for that country gave out no information. However, we knew what the Russian ration was in most cities and that the Russians had seized huge amounts of food in their invasion of Eastern Europe, Mongolia, and Manchuria. We believed that Russia proper was in no critical need, and even hoped that, in view of the gigantic amounts they had plundered, they might help out with some supplies for the hungry.⁶

While Soviet secrecy certainly helped keep many Western observers in the dark about the USSR's food needs, Hoover's supposition, whether genuine or not, was grossly inaccurate. At the time that the Famine Emergency Committee began its work, the USSR found itself in the early stages of a severe drought. People in certain locales were already dying from starvation, and the Soviet government's grain reserves were dwindling.⁷

But humanitarian concerns took a backseat to politics, and such was the case on both sides of the descending iron curtain. Hoover's memoirs suggest that the Famine Emergency Committee's humanitarian mission was not entirely an end in itself: it was also intended to combat communism.⁸ Not to be outdone, the Soviet government exported grain to Europe in an effort to elevate its international political standing and to gain the sympathy of countries that could potentially turn Communist.⁹ In March 1946, the interests of the United States and USSR converged: the United States promised to provide ships to carry 600,000 tons of Soviet grain to France.¹⁰ The United States received assistance in meeting Europe's food needs and the USSR enhanced its image in the eyes of the French.

In the end, the countries that the Famine Emergency Committee took under its care managed to avoid famine; the Soviet Union did not. The people of the USSR, who had just played a leading role in defeating the Axis powers, were forced to endure the third major famine in approximately a quarter of a century (1921–22, 1932–33, and 1946–47). Soviet political goals had figured prominently in the unfolding of the first two famines, both of which have been studied extensively.¹¹ In 1921, after the military victory of the Soviet Red Army over the anti-Communist White Armies, drought and aggressive Soviet grain requisitioning policies sparked a famine that took the lives of several million people.¹² The Bolsheviks also capitalized on the famine by expropriating property of the Russian Orthodox Church, under the guise of famine relief, at a time when society—particularly the clergy, peasantry, and other social groups deemed reactionary by the Soviet leadership—could not

muster much resistance.¹³ Only a decade later, a Soviet campaign to eliminate private ownership in the countryside and collectivize agriculture, launched as part of the First Five-Year Plan in 1928, triggered a mass famine with millions of more deaths in 1932–33.¹⁴

In 1946–47, between 1 and 2 million people perished from starvation and famine-related diseases.¹⁵ Owing to the devastation of agriculture, people in certain locales suffered from hunger following the war, but food shortages became widespread after the lack of rainfall during the late spring and early summer of 1946 and the consequent crop failure in many regions. With much of the meager harvest going to the state, people's food supplies dwindled and large segments of the village population began to experience acute hunger in the autumn and winter. Mortality peaked in the first half of the following year and began to decline in the latter part of the year, especially after the relatively successful 1947 harvest in the fall. Starvation did not entirely disappear after 1947, but demographic figures attest that famine as a mass phenomenon had ended by the start of 1948.¹⁶ The country also achieved a degree of normalcy owing to the full cancellation of rationing at the end of December 1947.

Considering the prominence of politics in the unfolding of the previous famine crises, it is not surprising that the author of the only existing monograph on the famine of 1946–47 in the USSR views the postwar crisis through a political lens. V.F. Zima characterizes the famine as manmade and even suggests that it was premeditated to bring a restless society to heel after the war.¹⁷ This interpretation of the famine is to a degree intuitive, because the late Stalin years (1945–53) have often been described by historians and political scientists alike as a period during which the Communist government reasserted control over society after the chaotic war years and, according to some scholars, placed the finishing touches on the totalitarian Stalinist political system.¹⁸

Though not void of merit, Zima's narrow perspective prevents him from providing a complete picture of the famine and tears it from its full historical context. The famine of 1946–47 belongs not only to the field of Soviet political history, in which Zima situates it, but also to the histories of World War II, the cold war, ideology, and famine throughout time, only to name a few. Viewing the hunger crisis while considering these various contexts has at least two benefits. First, it allows for a more complete picture of the famine itself. The Soviet leadership did not make decisions in a vacuum and numerous influences converged to shape the state's postwar policies. The far-reaching ambitions of the state collided with the reality of limited resources. The outcome—the pursuit of some goals at the expense of others—offers insight into the world view of the post–World War II Soviet elite.

Second, research on the famine can help contribute to our understanding of each of the aforementioned “histories.” World War II was one of the major causes of the meager 1946 harvest and postwar deprivation was part of the continuing price that the people of the Soviet Union had to pay for victory in what came to be known in the Soviet Union as the Great Patriotic War. Indeed, some people considered the war to be over only when rationing stopped at the end of 1947. The country did not recover economically until the 1950s and sporadic hunger plagued Soviet villages into the early 1950s.¹⁹ Mounting tensions between former allies—Britain and the United States on one side and the Soviet Union on the other—and the emergent cold war unquestionably influenced the outcome of the famine. But the converse is also true: the famine in some ways shaped the cold war. Ideology guided the decision-making of the Soviet leadership after the war, contributing to the hardships of the people of the USSR. An analysis of the famine in a historic and global context allows us to consider how the ideology of the Soviet state differed from those of other governments that failed to prevent famine.²⁰ While each famine is a unique event, it also inevitably bears many similarities to famines in other settings; therefore, the 1946–47 hunger cannot be seen as entirely distinctive. As David Arnold has astutely pointed out, while famines reveal something about a given society at a specific time, they also serve as points of contact between different societies and cultures.²¹ For example, many social responses to drought and hunger—such as migration, the consumption of surrogates, and theft—are universal. At the same time, the illumination of certain aspects of famine in a particular context can contribute to our understanding of famine as a whole.

In short, I view the Soviet famine of 1946–47 as an intersection of various influences and events. Since hunger crises are rooted in a given setting, yet impinged upon by global factors, and because their study has both local and global significance, my goal is twofold. I aim to shed light on Soviet politics and society in the aftermath of World War II *and* to add to our understanding of famine as such by placing the given crisis in comparative and global context. In striving toward this goal, my study addresses the following questions: What caused the famine? Did government decisions contribute to famine conditions in the USSR? What role did the devastation of war play in postwar hardships? What does the presence of famine in the USSR tell us about the origins of the cold war? Did the authorities show preferential treatment for certain segments of the population? Was the famine of 1946–47 a man-made or political famine? Might it have been used as a weapon against certain nationalities or social groups? Was the famine limited to the Soviet countryside? How were urban dwellers and workers affected by the crisis? Did people resist famine, and if so, how? What coping mechanisms did they employ? Did

the famine increase opposition to the Soviet state? Did people outside of the USSR know about the famine? Could the famine have been prevented? Why was the Soviet government so secretive? Why was the Soviet Union continually plagued with food crises and famine? Was collectivization of agriculture a success or a failure, and why? Are large-scale famines peculiar to Stalinist or totalitarian states?

In addressing these questions, this book engages scholarly literature on both the postwar Soviet Union and famine in other settings. Zima's monograph remains the only full-length study on the Soviet famine of 1946–47; my departure from his approach has already been mentioned above. Aside from the difference in methodology, I seek to complement his findings by tapping sources that were unavailable in 1996 and those he happened to overlook. Elena Zubkova and Donald Filtzer have both produced invaluable works on the late Stalin years. Zubkova provides insight into Soviet public opinion, while Filtzer's account describes the plight of workers during the period of reconstruction.²² While both works touch on the famine, my tighter focus allows me to test some of their assumptions and provide more accurate information on the roots and consequences of the state's famine policy.

In placing the 1946–47 crisis in the context of famine throughout history, I draw on scholars who have written about famine in other settings. In particular, I have been inspired by some of the approaches articulated by David Arnold in his *Famine: Social Crisis and Historical Change*. I view the famine as an intersection between what he calls “event” and “structure.”²³ This perspective allows for the consideration of long-term influences and currents, the *longue durée*, without sacrificing the particulars of a given event. Guided by my findings, I also seek to suggest fresh perspectives that might contribute to theories of famine causation. In particular, I address Amartya Sen's “entitlement thesis,” which posits that famines can occur despite the absence of food availability decline.²⁴

I draw heavily on recently declassified materials gathered at the State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF) and the Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (RGASPI) in Moscow, as well as published document collections from Russian, Ukrainian, and Moldovan archives. The sources most crucial to my study are the collections of the Ministry of Health, Soviet Red Cross, Central Committee of Trade Unions of Government Trade, Ministry of State Control, Main Police Administration, Agricultural Section of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, and Information Sector of the Organizational-Instructional Section of the Central Committee, as well as the papers of high-ranking government leaders (I.V. Stalin, V.M. Molotov, G.M. Malenkov, N.S. Khrushchev, A.A. Andreev, and L.M. Kaganovich). These sources allow me to view the famine at various levels of society and

government, from peasants and workers to bureaucrats and ministers. I also make use of the published papers of the U.S. Department of State and British Foreign Office, as well as accounts written by visitors to the Soviet Union in 1946–47. While they fail to make mention of famine, articles in *Pravda*, the Party's central newspaper, are helpful to a degree, because they reveal what citizens were reading and provide insight into the goals of the state.

Parts I and II of the book focus on the origins of the famine, its societal impact, and state intervention. In seeking to trace the roots of the meager 1946 harvest, Chapter 1 surveys the devastation caused by the Nazi invasion (particularly with regard to manpower and mechanization in the countryside), evaluates how the Soviet elite addressed postwar problems, and determines how these measures affected society. I also question whether poor harvests free a government of responsibility for famine. Chapter 2 uncovers the heretofore undocumented efforts of the Soviet Red Cross in saving the lives of children during the famine. It likewise considers the impact of government decrees in September 1946 on the Ministry of Health's (*Ministerstvo Zdravookhraneniia*) efforts to combat child mortality. Chapter 3 describes the food distribution system in towns and cities prior to the onset of drought and famine. Focusing on Moscow, this chapter describes the reactions of Moscow trade workers, and more generally the city's working population, to the state's ration reforms in September 1946. Chapter 4 grapples with the issue of resistance during the famine. I define resistance from the perspective of the Soviet government, break down the complex relationship between famine and resistance, and determine to what extent various forms of resistance exhibited during the famine can be seen as opposition to the Soviet political order.

In Part III, I broaden my focus, viewing the postwar famine in the context of international politics and from a global history perspective. Chapter 5 examines the shifting climate of international food aid after World War II and considers Soviet food policies in the context of the emerging cold war. In Chapter 6, I place the famine of 1946–47 in the context of Russian history, examining the natural conditions of the Soviet landmass and the pre-Soviet legacy in agriculture, and isolate the features of Soviet policies that shaped the outcome of food crises. In the final chapter, I place the postwar famine in global context and draw parallels with other notable famine events in modern history. I also offer conclusions about what my findings might tell us about other famines, particularly in countries ruled by governments deemed totalitarian, and test the utility of categorizing famines as “totalitarian.”

Every author who deals with famine must confront the issue of definitions and what exactly constitutes “famine.” Alex de Waal, in studying hunger in Africa, proposes three categories of increasing intensity to deal with the varying severity of famines: “dearth,” “famines that kill,” and “famines that

starve.”²⁵ We can say that the famine of 1946–47 was all three: some people experienced food shortages and malnutrition, others died from diseases and debilitation brought about by these shortages, and yet others died of starvation. As we shall see in this book, the famine meant different things for different people, but it unquestionably killed *en masse*. I have adopted Arnold’s definition of famine as “a collective catastrophe of such magnitude as to cause social and economic dislocation,” because it reflects both the scale and the social significance of famines, distinguishing them from localized food shortages.²⁶ In placing the postwar Soviet famine in comparative perspective, I focus on other famine crises that similarly killed on a large scale.

In providing as complete an account as possible of the Soviet famine of 1946–47, I hope that my work will bring more attention to this important topic. Nonetheless, in order to provide a broad view of a national event, a historian inevitably sacrifices some of the nuance and detail that more localized studies can provide. I anticipate that the use of local archives—something I initially set out to do but was forced to forego owing to the abundance of materials in central archives—will eventually fill some of the voids that remain. Furthermore, while many documents in former Soviet archives have been declassified, and have thus presented a wealth of opportunities to scholars, more materials will likely become available in coming years. Nor do I have any illusions that the archival record is complete. Some documents have not survived to our day and, inevitably, not all useful information made it onto paper to begin with. For this reason, I adopt a cautious approach toward documents and, where possible, seek to corroborate evidence using multiple sources. In short, in seeking to offer a record of the famine with breadth of perspective, I have striven equally to pay attention to detail and avoid unfounded assumptions. I will leave it to the reader to judge the measure of my success in this endeavor.