

Red Famine: Stalin's War on Ukraine

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During the horrific famine of 1932–3, did Ukrainian peasants die because they were Ukrainians or because they were peasants? This blunt question is at the heart of scholarly debate on the famine: while some believe that the famine was a deliberate attempt to crush Ukrainian nationalism (and thus can be considered an act of genocide), others see it as a product of Soviet agricultural mismanagement and Bolshevik indifference to the peasants' fate. Terry Martin suggests a compromise he calls the 'national interpretation of the famine'. He argues that the famine originated in the sphere of Soviet agricultural policies. However, Moscow interpreted Soviet Ukraine's failure to meet its (impossible) grain quotas as an act of *national* defiance. The Bolsheviks introduced harsher measures targeting the Ukrainian Soviet Republic that transformed the widespread starvation of 1932 into the horrendous famine of 1933.⁽¹⁾

Anne Applebaum's new book addresses this question. As a journalist, she is a long-time commentator on Central and Eastern Europe and, as the member and founder of various thinktanks, an actor aspiring to shape it. Therefore, unusually for a historical work on Ukraine, her monograph has received wider attention, including numerous reviews in the press.

Red Famine is a work of three parts. The first places the Ukrainian nation at the centre of the story. This is unsurprising, as Applebaum is well-known for her contention that nationalism is the source of the citizen's civic engagement without which democracy is impossible.⁽²⁾ This carries with it the ontological assumption that nations must be, if not perennial, then at least very old, a fundamental and enduring part of what it is to be human. Accordingly, in her opening chapter on 'The Ukrainian question', Applebaum ignores the great body of scholarship that sees nations as modern creations, instead claiming that by the late Middle Ages Ukrainians had their own distinct language, food, customs and traditions. In the 18th and 19th centuries, the period in which most scholars see nations emerging, a sense of Ukrainian identity merely 'sharpened'. The leitmotif of this history she finds summed up in Voltaire's claim that 'Ukraine has always aspired to be free' (p. 5).

This narrative loses all the fascinating complexity of Ukrainian nation-building. In the 19th century, intellectuals in the area we now call Ukraine did not agree on their identity. In Eastern Galicia, then ruled by the Habsburgs, they debated whether they were Ruthenians (members a nation confined to the borders of the

Austrian and Hungarian lands), Ukrainians or Russians. Equally, in the Russian Empire, some described themselves as members of a Ukrainian nation separate from Russia, and others possessed a Little Russian identity, seeing themselves as distinct from the Great Russians to the north, yet still part of an overarching Russian nation. While the intellectuals sought to bring their concepts of identity to the village, many peasants refused to view themselves in the intelligentsia's national categories. Applebaum repeatedly stresses the peasant nature of the Ukrainian nation, yet does not consider what it means if the majority of 'Ukrainian' peasants were uninterested in whether they were part of it or not. At the same time, far from always aspiring to be free, even self-conscious Ukrainians could combine this identity with imperial loyalties.

Applebaum's commitment to nationalism is further evident in the two chapters on the revolution and civil war in Ukraine, 1917–1920. These are important because later in the book she argues that the civil war experience shaped Bolshevik perceptions of Ukraine during the famine. Between 1917 and 1920, various warring parties clashed in Ukraine: the Bolsheviks, the Whites, different groups of Ukrainian nationalists, the Poles, the Central Powers, the Entente and numerous independent commanders, the most famous of whom is Nestor Makhno. The chaos made it very difficult for any one power to establish itself until 1920, when the Bolsheviks expelled the last forces of the Ukrainian People's Republic.

Applebaum depicts this as a period of national renaissance. This is simplistic. In contrast to the later sections of the book that admirably give the peasant victims of the famine a voice, here the peasants are talked about but rarely speak themselves. Thus, Applebaum claims without any supporting evidence that the Ukrainian national movement gained support among the peasantry through its 'revival' of the Ukrainian language. Yet, on the few occasions that the peasants are allowed say something, Applebaum reveals what was in fact the case: their major concern was not national language rights but the ownership of the land. Ironically, the only peasant Applebaum mentions by name was a Bolshevik supporter. By accepting the nationalist viewpoint, Applebaum fails to see the implications of her own evidence.

This also leads her to play down the atrocities committed in nationalism's name. She claims – rightly – that all sides in the civil war in Ukraine perpetrated pogroms, but dismisses any further investigation into responsibility for the pogroms as 'cherry-picking'. However, Applebaum is herself engaging in some cherry-picking here. She expresses a preference for the lowest estimate of the number of pogrom victims at 50,000. This figure comes from the pogrom researcher Naum Gergel.⁽³⁾ She does not mention that his research also revealed that troops of the Ukrainian People's Republic were responsible for about 40 per cent of the pogroms, and their pogroms were on average more murderous than those of the Whites and the Bolsheviks. Worse is her claim that 'In the town of Proskuriv (now Khmelnytskyi) a riot started by the Bolsheviks led to the deaths of 1,600 people over the course of two days' (p. 50). This is an obfuscation of the identity both of the perpetrators and the victims of the most infamous and bloodiest Ukrainian pogrom of the period. Really, the sentence should refer to 'a pogrom started by *Ukrainian troops* [that] led to the deaths of 1,600 *Jews*'.

Not without justification, Applebaum rejects the charge of antisemitism against Symon Petliura, head of the Ukrainian People's Republic during the pogroms, but admits that many Ukrainian generals and soldiers were antisemitic. However, despite this acknowledgement, she then uses her exoneration of Petliura to absolve the entire Ukrainian national movement. As a result, she dismisses associations of the Ukrainian People's Republic with pogroms as Bolshevik propaganda. When mentioning the killing of Petliura in Paris in 1926 by the Jewish anarchist Sholem Schwartzbard (whom she misleadingly identifies as a *Russian Jew*), she remarks that 'Even if Schwartzbard wasn't a direct Soviet agent, as many thought at the time, he was certainly inspired by Soviet propaganda that demonized Petliura' (p. 54). Applebaum neglects to mention that Schwartzbard had witnessed the aftermath of pogroms himself and that members of his own family had fallen victim to them. Many notorious pogromists had named their units after Petliura. While Petliura may not have instigated the pogroms, we do not have to refer to Soviet propaganda to find out why Schwartzbard blamed him, the head of the Ukrainian army, for the violence. In contrast to her entirely justified desire to reveal the responsibility of Bolshevik perpetrators, Applebaum is much more cautious regarding Ukrainian

wrongdoers.

The Ukrainian nationalists and peasant insurgents forced the Bolsheviks to make compromises: the result was a Ukrainian Socialist Soviet Republic with its own Communist Party and the New Economic Policy, which allowed peasants to retain their farms and trade their produce. Applebaum is very dismissive of the former concession, claiming that Moscow controlled everything. Later chapters, however, describe how the Ukrainian Communists pursued a rather independent policy of Ukrainisation to promote the Ukrainian language and culture. This somewhat contradicts her earlier assessment. While it is certainly true that many Bolsheviks were always very suspicious of this policy and ultimately curtailed it with violence, the route to this outcome was more circuitous than Applebaum suggests.

These introductory chapters are meant to set the scene for the depiction of the famine in the book's second and main part. However, this begins with a shift in focus away from the nation: Applebaum firmly locates the famine's origins in Soviet agricultural policy. In the late 1920s, the Soviet Union abandoned the New Economic Policy in favour of collectivisation, requisitioning and dekulakisation. The Bolsheviks sought to force peasants to join collective farms. They imposed grain quotas, the yields of which were to finance industrial growth through exports. Requisitioning brigades went into the village to take its produce and employed violence to overcome opposition. Accompanying this was a campaign to liquidate the so-called kulak class, the supposedly richer peasants. Farmers identified as kulaks lost their farms and were exiled to the Soviet Union's inhospitable regions. Peasants resisted, using methods from violence to hoarding. This created a crisis in Soviet agriculture that led to widespread starvation throughout the Soviet Union.

In August 1932, Stalin, after reading a secret service report on resistance to his agricultural policies in Ukraine, blamed the republic's failure to fulfil the grain quotas on the presence of Ukrainian nationalists among the Communist Party of Ukraine. This led to a series of measures in Ukraine that transformed the widespread starvation into full-blown famine. Collective farms that failed to meet their quotas were put on blacklists: they could no longer receive or trade in goods, while those which they had already were confiscated. The Soviet regime also closed the borders of the Ukrainian Soviet Republic, preventing Ukrainian peasants from travelling to areas with bread. As a result, around four million died in the Ukrainian Republic. Applebaum unflinchingly describes the horrors of this crime, making powerful use of the words of the victims themselves. In addition, after identifying Ukrainisation as the cause for the failure to meet the grain quotas, the Bolsheviks ended the policy, purged the Communist Party of Ukraine, persecuted the Ukrainian intelligentsia and closed down Ukrainian cultural bodies.

Thus, Applebaum follows Terry Martin's idea of the 'national interpretation of the famine', explicitly crediting him for the argument: the famine originated in the Soviet policy toward peasants, but became part of the regime's nationality policy. This is an entirely reasonable account that accurately reflects a well-respected historiographical approach.

However, it is not enough for Applebaum, who now has the opportunity to return to her earlier nationally centred narrative. For example, she claims that the famine led to Russification. She cites a policy of resettling the regions devastated by famine: 21,000 households of Russian peasants were relocated to Ukraine in autumn 1933, to be followed by a further 20,000 'from Russia as well as other parts of Ukraine' (p. 294). Her depiction of the second wave is misleading: in fact, about 18,000 households came from the Ukrainian and only roughly 3,000 from the Russian republic.⁽⁴⁾ Moreover, the majority of the peasants from outside Ukraine returned to their homes. There was a further wave of resettlement in 1935, but these were mostly Ukrainians, Poles and Germans from the west of the Ukrainian republic. Applebaum cites these facts but does not consider the implications for her Russification thesis. Indeed, Henadii Iefimenko, the scholar who compiled the figures used by Applebaum, writes explicitly that 'the conclusion that this resettlement caused any perceptible Russification [...] does not correspond to reality'.⁽⁵⁾ Applebaum does not quote this statement.

Moreover, a careful reading reveals further information in *Red Famine* that qualifies the 'national

interpretation of the famine'. Applebaum sees the Soviet suspicion of the Ukrainian Soviet Republic's population as a product of the Ukrainian nationalist movement's activity during the 1917–1920 civil war; this echoes her depiction of the war as a Ukrainian national renaissance. However, the Bolsheviks distrusted Ukraine because it had been an area of operation for the Whites, foreign interventionists and independent insurgents as well as the Ukrainian nationalists. Applebaum does not seem to have read Felix Schnell's important work, which explicitly makes this point.⁽⁶⁾ Nevertheless, many of the documents quoted by Applebaum support this view. For example, in December 1932, a decree spoke of 'kulaks, former officers, Petliurites, supporters of the Kuban Rada' (p. 210) infiltrating lower level party committees; only the third item on the list specifically refers to Ukrainian nationalists. Tragically, Ukrainian peasants suffered in 1917–1920 at the hands of anti-Bolshevik forces, and the latter's activity strengthened the link in the Bolshevik mind between Ukraine and anti-Soviet resistance, for which the Ukrainian village suffered yet again in 1932–3. Moreover, whatever national perceptions they had, the Bolsheviks still saw the supposed anti-Soviet resistance in terms of class: as one repentant Bolshevik later recalled, 'We spoke of the "peasant front" and "kulak menace", "village socialism" and "class resistance"' (p. 235).

Many non-Ukrainian residents of the Ukrainian Soviet Republic experienced the famine, too. Late in the book, Applebaum claims (without a substantiating reference) that during the famine ethnic Poles and Germans suffered less than Ukrainians because they were not implicated in the Ukrainian national movement in 1932–3. However, in an earlier chapter she writes that ethnic Poles and Germans were three times more likely to be classified as kulaks; indeed, the very article she cites here provides compelling evidence – ignored by Applebaum – that, as a result, a similar percentage of ethnic Germans died in Ukraine in 1932–3 as did ethnic Ukrainians.⁽⁷⁾ Moreover, Polish and German cultural institutions were also closed down during the turn against Ukrainisation, a fact she mentions but does not reflect upon.

The 'national interpretation of the famine' also implies that Ukraine suffered more than the Russian grain-growing regions – an idea contested by the Russian historian Viktor Kondrashin. Applebaum briefly mentions his work, but dismisses it claiming that only in Ukraine did the Bolsheviks impose blacklists and travel bans, meaning here the death toll was much higher. However, Kondrashin provides evidence that the Soviet regime did employ these very policies in some Russian grain-growing regions and as a result at least four regions of the Russian Republic experienced similar levels of mortality to Ukraine. He argues that the determining factor was not a region's ethnic make-up but its economic function.⁽⁸⁾ I am not in a position to verify Kondrashin's figures, but Applebaum certainly needs to engage with his argument more than she does.

I am not trying to reject the 'national interpretation of the famine' entirely but rather qualify it. Clearly, ethnic stereotypes of Ukrainians were part of a bundle of Bolshevik perceptions that conditioned Soviet policy-making toward Soviet Ukraine from the second half of 1932. Some might see this as genocide, others not. Personally, I think it is more important for the historian to determine the circumstances and decisions that led to acts of mass murder than debate what one-word term we should use to describe them.

While discussing the famine as genocide in the book's third part, Applebaum, at first, seems to agree. Here, Applebaum acknowledges, rightly, that genocide is a legal and moral category rather than a historical one. She then describes how Raphael Lemkin, who coined the term, viewed the famine as an act of genocide. After that, she examines the codification of the concept in the 1948 UN convention; she follows Norman Naimark ⁽⁹⁾ in arguing that the Soviet Union deliberately intervened in the framing of the convention's text to ensure that the law could not be used against it by excluding political and social groups from the definition; consequently, it is difficult, she claims, to classify the famine as a crime under international law. However, Applebaum concludes that 'it matters less, nowadays, whether the 1932–3 famine is called a genocide, a crime against humanity, or simply an act of mass terror' (p. 362); it is enough to recognise that it was a government crime against its own citizens and that the Soviet regime sought to undermine Ukrainian nationalism.

From this, one might think that Applebaum is sceptical of the thesis of the famine as genocide. One of the first reviews to appear, by Sheila Fitzpatrick, a towering historian of the Soviet Union, interpreted the book

this way.⁽¹⁰⁾ Many Ukrainians expressed concern on social media at this: they had assumed that Applebaum, as a vocal supporter of Kyiv against the Kremlin, would also argue that the famine was an act of genocide. Applebaum issued a statement to allay their worries. Fitzpatrick's reading was, she claimed 'exactly the opposite of what I wrote': 'My argument is that the famine fits perfectly into the original definition of genocide, as conceived by the legal scholar Raphael Lemkin'; the crime only does not meet the UN definition because of the Soviet Union's role in drawing it up.⁽¹¹⁾ However, this later explanation seems to involve a shift in emphasis, leaving out the doubts regarding the usefulness of the term genocide.

Moreover, there is something very odd about Applebaum's discussion of the UN definition. She claims that UN documents require an intention to kill all the members of the ethnic group for an act to be considered genocide. However, the UN convention itself explicitly describes genocide as 'acts committed with intent to destroy, **in whole or in part** [my emphasis], a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such'; the United Nations Office on Genocide Prevention stresses that 'Genocide can also be committed against only a part of the group'.⁽¹²⁾ In addition, if, as Applebaum argues, the Soviet regime adopted policies that led to mass death due to *ethno-national* perceptions of Ukrainians, the fact that the Soviet Union excluded *political* and *social* groups from the convention is entirely irrelevant to the categorisation of the famine; one already has, arguably, enough reason to classify it as genocide according to the UN convention. Indeed, some historians of the Ukrainian famine have made this argument without reference to any of Applebaum's reservations over the UN definition.⁽¹³⁾

Underlying Applebaum's discussion of the UN convention is her commitment to the image of the Bolsheviks (and today's Russians) as skilled manipulators of public perceptions. Consequently, Applebaum offers an inaccurate argument that, ironically, goes against her own desired conclusions on the question of genocide: because two overarching narratives drive the narrative rather than the sources themselves, the result is both confused and confusing.

Propaganda is, indeed, a major subject of the book's third section, examining the aftermath, Bolshevik coverup and historiography of the famine; it allows Applebaum to complete an arc tying Schwartzbard's killing of Petliura and the denial of the famine by the Bolsheviks to Russia's current propaganda campaign against Ukraine. The connections are often quite reductionist, for example describing the famine as the cause of many of independent Ukraine's problems. She also ignores the more questionable aspects of 'remembering' the famine, such as the occasional attempts to present this Soviet crime as a Jewish one. At the same time, Applebaum is too keen to give the impression that the only alternative to seeing the famine as an intentional act of genocide is to deny its very historicity.

The problem with *Red Famine*, therefore, is not its treatment of the famine itself; this is moving and largely convincing. Rather, the book's weakness is the historical framework into which Applebaum seeks to place the events of 1932–3. Sometimes, it feels as if she is writing a teleological history tracing an inexorable line from the end of the Middle Ages to the current war in Ukraine via the Great Famine under the motto that 'Ukraine has always aspired to be free'. At the same time, Applebaum often gives us evidence that contradicts her conclusions, not considering the implications of the former for the latter. On numerous occasions (not all mentioned here for lack of space), she simply gets things wrong. The confusion over what argument the book was actually trying to make therefore comes as no surprise.

Notes

1. Terry Martin, 'The 1932–33 Ukrainian Terror: new documentation on surveillance and the thought process of Stalin', in *Famine-Genocide in Ukraine, 1932–1933. Western Archives, Testimonies and New Research*, ed. Wsevolod W. Isajiw (Toronto, 2003), pp. 97–114.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Anne Applebaum, 'Nationalism is exactly what Ukraine needs', *New Republic*, 13 May 2014 <<https://newrepublic.com/article/117505/ukraines-only-hope-nationalism> [2]> [accessed 13 November 2017].[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. N. Gergel, 'The pogroms in the Ukraine in 1918–21', *Yivo Annual of Jewish Science*, 6 (1998),

- 237–52.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Henadii Iefimenko, ‘Mif pro pereselelnia’, *historians.in.ua*, 15 August 2015 <<http://www.historians.in.ua/index.php/en/dyskusiya/1588-hennadii-yefimenko-mif-pro-pereselelnia-1933-1934-rokiv> [3]> [accessed 13 November 2017].[Back to \(4\)](#)
 5. Henadii Iefimenko, ‘Pereselelnia ta deportatsii v postholodomorni roky (1933–1936): poraionnyi zriz’, *Problemy istorii Ukrainy: fakty, sudzhennia, poshuky*, 22 (2013), pp. 136–166, here p. 136.[Back to \(5\)](#)
 6. Felix Schnell *Räume des Schreckens. Gewalt und Gruppenmilitanz in der Ukraine 1905–1933* (Hamburg, 2012), pp. 418–24.[Back to \(6\)](#)
 7. J. Otto Pohl, Eric J. Schmaltz and Ronald J. Vossler ‘“In Our Hearts we Felt the Sentence of Death”: ethnic German recollections of mass violence in the USSR’, 1928–48, *Journal of Genocide Research*, 11, 2–3 (2009), 323–54, here p. 326.[Back to \(7\)](#)
 8. V. Kondrashin, ‘Golod 1932–1933 gg. v Rossiiskoi Federatsii (RSFSR)’, in *Sovremennaia rossiisko-ukrainskaia istoriografiia goloda 1932–1933 gg. v SSSR*, ed. V. V. Kondrashin (Moscow, 2011), pp. 257–81, here pp. 271, 274–8.[Back to \(8\)](#)
 9. Norman M. Naimark, *Stalin’s Genocides* (Princeton, NJ, 2010).[Back to \(9\)](#)
 10. Sheila Fitzpatrick, ‘Red Famine by Anne Applebaum review – did Stalin deliberately let Ukraine starve?’, *The Guardian*, 25 August 2017, <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/aug/25/red-famine-stalins-war-on-ukraine-anne-applebaum-review> [4]> [accessed 13 November 2017].[Back to \(10\)](#)
 11. <https://www.facebook.com/anneapplebaumwp/posts/704110623118513> [5]> [accessed 13 November 2017]. Fitzpatrick subsequently apologised to Applebaum for mistakenly reading her work as a ‘reasonable and nuanced account that recognised complexity’ <<https://twitter.com/jypersian/status/907936649354416128> [6]> [accessed 13 November 2017].[Back to \(11\)](#)
 12. <http://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/genocide.html> [7]> [accessed 13 November 2017].[Back to \(12\)](#)
 13. Nicolas Werth, ‘The Great Ukrainian Famine of 1932–33, 13 April 2008 <<http://www.sciencespo.fr/mass-violence-war-massacre-resistance/fr/document/great-ukrainian-famine-1932-33> [8]> [accessed 13 November 2017].[Back to \(13\)](#)

Other reviews:

Guardian

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/aug/25/red-famine-stalins-war-on-ukraine-anne-applebaum-review> [4]

Washington Post

https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/the-deliberate-starvation-of-millions-in-ukraine/2017/11/03/0999f2d0-b8bb-11e7-be94-fabb0f1e9ffb_story.html [9]

Times

<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/review-red-famine-anne-applebaum-lg0vzwfvc> [10]

Jewish Chronicle

<https://www.thejc.com/culture/books/book-review-anne-applebaum-1.445702> [11]

New York Times

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/18/books/review/red-famine-stalin-ukraine-anne-applebaum.html> [12]

Financial Times

<https://www.ft.com/content/ffa161ae-97af-11e7-8c5c-c8d8fa6961bb> [13]

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[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/291081>

[2] <https://newrepublic.com/article/117505/ukraines-only-hope-nationalism>

[3] <http://www.historians.in.ua/index.php/en/dyskusiya/1588-hennadii-yefimenko-mif-pro-pereselelnia-1933-1934-rokiv>

- [4] <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/aug/25/red-famine-stalins-war-on-ukraine-anne-applebaum-review>
- [5] <https://www.facebook.com/anneapplebaumwp/posts/704110623118513>
- [6] <https://twitter.com/jypersian/status/907936649354416128>
- [7] <http://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/genocide.html>
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- [9] https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/the-deliberate-starvation-of-millions-in-ukraine/2017/11/03/0999f2d0-b8bb-11e7-be94-fabb0f1e9ffb_story.html?utm_term=.35c1fbcd3555
- [10] <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/review-red-famine-anne-applebaum-lg0vzwfvc>
- [11] <https://www.thejc.com/culture/books/book-review-anne-applebaum-1.445702>
- [12] <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/18/books/review/red-famine-stalin-ukraine-anne-applebaum.html>
- [13] <https://www.ft.com/content/ffa161ae-97af-11e7-8c5c-c8d8fa6961bb>