

Bohdan Klid and Alexander J. Motyl, compilers and eds, *The Holodomor Reader: A Sourcebook on the Famine of 1932–1933 in Ukraine*, Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies Press, Edmonton, 2012; xlv + 383 pp., 1 map; 9781894865296, \$34.95 (pbk)

**Reviewed by:** Francis King, *University of East Anglia, UK*

‘Peace, Bread and Land!’ is surely the most famous Bolshevik slogan of 1917. It dates from the very inception of state socialism. Yet many of the twentieth century’s most catastrophic failures to ensure an adequate supply of bread, and the millions of deaths which ensued, occurred in countries engaged in ‘building socialism’ – at least partly as a consequence of that enterprise. This is the common theme to these two otherwise very different books. Middell and Wemheuer’s edited volume contains essays on various manifestations of food shortage and rationing in the USSR, Eastern Europe and China, ranging in severity from a lack of traditional Christmas fare in 1960s Czechoslovakia to episodes of mass starvation in the USSR and China. Klid and Motyl’s compilation deals in depth with the most notorious of the state-socialist famines, the ‘Holodomor’ in Ukraine in 1932–1933. Middell and Wemheuer have no overarching political agenda, whereas Klid and Motyl’s volume is not only a work of scholarship but also of advocacy, for a particular – and not uncontested – interpretation of the Ukrainian calamity as a conscious act of ‘genocide’ on the part of the Soviet regime.

Middell’s introductory essay in *Hunger and Scarcity* stresses that socialist famine was not something apart from the broader history of famine in modern times, and notes that socialist experiments took place in a context of pre-existing

food insecurity. However, the regimes typically ‘refused to acknowledge’ the role their own policies played in precipitating famines (26).

This is a theme in Olga Velikanova’s piece on the aftermath of the first of these famines, in the early 1920s. The various forms of peasant resistance to Soviet requisitioning, such as reducing sown areas or even armed revolt, were all interpreted as ‘sabotage’, meaning that the Bolsheviks ‘blamed peasants themselves for the famine’ (113). The urge to deny problems also played its part: to demonstrate the USSR’s supposed economic recovery, grain exports recommenced in 1922, when part of the population was still starving (110).

Several of the essays deal with aspects of the Soviet collectivization famines of the early 1930s. Collectivization of agriculture was an enormous social upheaval even in Russia proper, where farming had long had communal aspects. In other parts of the USSR, with quite different traditions, it represented a far more complete destruction of a way of life, with devastating consequences. Robert Kindler describes the process in Kazakhstan, where the party authorities imposed collectivization and settlement on the cattle-herding Kazakh nomads. Here modernizing communist ideology combined with Russian imperial contempt for the ‘backward’ natives. By imposing impossible demands on Kazakh auls for deliveries of livestock and also grain (which they did not produce), the authorities destroyed the nomads’ economy. The ensuing famine killed around 35 per cent of the Kazakh population (59), and, unlike in the famine in Ukraine at the same time, bad harvests played no part in it (65).

Wendy Goldman relates the Great Terror of 1936–38 to the agricultural collectivization famines a few years before in various ways – as an exercise in scapegoating, in response to real opposition awakened by the famine, and as a way of further crushing collectivization’s main victims: former ‘kulaks’ and suchlike.

In his piece on the Chinese famine in the labour camp system, Klaus Mühlhahn makes the point that communist rule, particularly in its revolutionary phase, routinely designated sections of the population as ‘hostile’ for class, political or social reasons. This would affect all their entitlements, including entitlement to food. This is an important theme throughout the book: collectivization in particular aimed at giving the state maximum control of the food supply – even the supply to the food producers themselves. As Stephen G. Wheatcroft argues in his comparison of the Soviet and Chinese experiences, the aim of communist policy was not to create famines, but to control the food supply (368). Famine was the unintended consequence of those policies, and those without priority entitlement to food were generally the worst affected.

Olaf Mertelsmann provides a case study of post-war Estonia, where ‘one year of Soviet rule was enough to create malnutrition in an agricultural surplus area’ (235). Food was taken from Estonia to other parts of the USSR, resulting in urban food shortages. Low state procurement prices and little to buy meant that ‘peasants were discouraged from producing and marketing food, and a way to solve the resulting problems was forced collectivization’ from 1947 onwards (246). Productivity did

not reach the levels of the late 1930s again until the 1960s, but the regime had ensured food security for the urban areas.

Other essays, such as those on rationing in Poland and Czechoslovakia, and on school meals in the GDR, discuss the system when it was working more 'normally'. Alice Weinreb recounts the history of the GDR school lunch system as a 'site of contact and conflict' between parents and the state (274). Only gradually and through steady improvement were school lunches able to win popular acceptance and become a key part of the state welfare system.

Although it is frequently alluded to, Middell and Wemheuer do not have a separate essay on the Ukrainian famine of 1932–1933, the subject of Klid and Motyl's compilation. This is a very different book. An extensive introductory essay by the editors – two Canadian scholars of Ukrainian background – is followed by six thematic sections. The first contains excerpts from scholarship on the famine, the second contains legal assessments of it in relation to the charge of 'genocide'. In the third there are eyewitness accounts, while the fourth has survivor memoirs, letters and diaries. The fifth section, with documents from Soviet archives and foreign diplomatic reports, will be particularly valuable for historians, and the sixth section contains literary representations of the time.

The editors' introduction spells out the book's main aim: to encourage people to regard the Ukrainian famine ('Holodomor') as a case of genocide. Amongst other things, they appeal in this to the 'normative and political zeitgeist' (xxx). Anyone who questions this is 'a diehard skeptic or has a political agenda' (xxxi). This is very shaky ground – the fact that the term 'genocide' has become fashionable is not in itself a reason for employing it in any given context. Those who promote the 'genocide' thesis also have their own very obvious political agenda – it has become one of the key points of the official national narrative of the independent Ukrainian state, as well as a political weapon against pro-Moscow currents within today's Ukraine. The charge is also fiercely contested by most Russian scholars of the period, including convinced anti-Stalinists – again, for their own political reasons. There is a real danger that a political struggle around a legal definition could serve to obscure, rather than elucidate, the sequence of events and actions which caused the Ukrainian tragedy.

That said, the materials in this book do bring out very strongly that there was an undeniable national dimension to the state policies which precipitated the famine. Ukrainian cities were largely Russian-speaking, the countryside was mainly Ukrainian-speaking. Farming in Ukraine had been based more on individual farmsteads rather than village communes as in Russia. Collectivization in Ukraine had consequently met with intense resistance, and a civil war-type atmosphere reigned in the countryside, as an excerpt from Lev Kopelev's memoirs conveys very well (168–72). The trope of peasants as hostile saboteurs remained prominent in Bolshevik thinking. On top of the Bolsheviks' class fears of 'kulaks' – a term which could be applied to any peasant who resisted – they also feared a resurgence of Ukrainian nationalism. Memories of independence leader Symon Petliura's

march on Kiev in 1920, backed by Polish troops, were fresh in Bolshevik – and in Ukrainian – minds.

The official Soviet documents reproduced here show very well that priority was given to state grain procurement targets, even where this meant peasants were left with nothing. Stalin's right-hand man Lazar Kaganovich is quoted denouncing "bleeding-heart" party members' who protested against excessive procurements in November 1932 (245). A month later, Ukrainian CP secretary Stanislav Kosior wrote demanding fulfilment of the procurement plan, including seizure of 'so-called sowing seed' (251). Meanwhile, the political police was reporting 'the undoubted existence of an organized counterrevolutionary insurgent underground in Ukraine associated with foreign powers and foreign intelligence services, mainly with the Polish general staff' (256).

Historians particularly like quotable archive documents, but the memoirs, diaries and eye-witness accounts of the human suffering, along with some of the fictionalized accounts do a great deal to convey the desperate atmosphere of the time, the harshness of officialdom, the desolation of whole villages full of dead and dying peasants, and the helplessness of the victims and onlookers in the face of the disaster. This rounded approach is one of the great merits of Klid and Motyl's book.

So, here are two books which are both useful additions to the literature. Middel and Wemheuer's book would have benefited from a thorough proofread by a native English speaker; the quality of Klid and Motyl's translations is flawless. The highly-politicized legal argument about what constitutes 'genocide' should not be the main point here; what matters is that we understand what happened, how and why.