



Frank Sysyn and Andrea Graziosi, editors, *Communism and Hunger: The Ukrainian, Chinese, Kazakh, and Soviet Famines in Comparative Perspective*. Edmonton, Toronto: Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies Press, 2016. 158 pp. \$24.95 Cdn (paper).

This collection of papers from a conference organized by the Holodomor Research and Education Consortium at the Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies of the University of Alberta focuses on famines in non-Russian-speaking areas of the Soviet Union from 1928–1933 and in the People’s Republic of China during Mao Zedong’s disastrous Great Leap Forward industrialization policy (1958–1961). According to Felix Wemheuer, those account for 80 percent of famine deaths in the twentieth century (*Famine Politics in Maoist China and the Soviet Union*, 2014). Frank Sysyn and Andrea Graziosi’s volume emphasizes purposeful efforts by the Soviet government to starve Ukrainian peasants (Bianco 75, Graziosi 93), that is, to “subdue the Ukrainian peasantry at the cost of its partial extermination,” by not sending relief grain on time. This effort represented “the Stalinist leadership’s anti-Ukrainian turn” (Pianciola 109, 107) and the otherwise “new cynical and brutal relationship between the ‘socialist’ state and its subjects based on a new hierarchy and callous indifference to mass death” (Werth 23).

The first chapter, by Nicolas Werth, introduces the famine in the Soviet Union from 1928–1933, stressing that the majority of deaths occurred in Ukraine, the Kuban region, and Kazakhstan. The second chapter, by Sarah Cameron, is an overview of studies on the famine in Kazakhstan from 1930–1933, including also a discussion on a lack of sources and understanding regarding the Kazakh case in the context of “Pan-Soviet famine” (Cameron 33). The third chapter is about the famine in China resulting from the Great Leap Forward by Zhou Xun who had published a collection of oral histories of the victims. The chapter shows “a society of deliquescence” (40) focusing on accounts of cannibalism. Lucien Bianco’s

chapter compares Soviet famines in the early 1930s with the Chinese famine, as does Andrea Graziosi in his chapter comparing the similarities and differences of the two famines, both are based on secondary sources. The chapter by Niccolò Pianciola is a comparative (“transnational”, 102) history of Soviet and Chinese Stalinist policies in Soviet Central Asia and in Tibet, Xinjiang, and Mongolia, such as “collectivization, sedentarization, famine” (139) in the 1930s and during the Great Leap. Pianciola, based on archival sources, examines methodological problems inherent to a comparative study of Chinese and Soviet policies regarding pastoralist populations and discusses how such populations managed to escape famine.

The volume gives an overview of Western studies on Soviet and Chinese famines and the difficulties of such studies, including the paucity and unavailability of local sources. It shows research gaps (such as local politics) and sets research agendas in comparative studies of regional famines in Russia and in Central Asia (Pianciola 103). Yet, the volume may leave the reader who is not versed in the studies of famine and Soviet politics with a few questions. For example, since “during famine only the inhabitants of Moscow and Leningrad were fed consistently by the state rationing system for reasons of the stability of the regime” (Pianciola 107), and if state policies in the main grain-producing areas of the Soviet Union, the so-called “bread baskets,” were caused by collectivization (Pianciola 108, Cameron 26), why is the disaster in Ukraine not compared to the one in the Volga region? Why are casualties in the Kuban area grouped together with Ukrainian casualties (4.2 million) and not with more than one million casualties elsewhere in the Soviet Union? These famines were the result of similar Soviet policies applied in Belarus, Siberia, the northern region, the Urals, Bashkiria and Tatarstan, and central and northern Russia. Given that the latter are “largely unknown local famines” from 1928–1933 (Werth 10, 13), these would be apt for comparison.

This collection illustrates how politicized the topic of these famines is today. The attacks on Ukrainian nationalists in the early 1930s (Werth 12) and references to “Ukrainian nationalism,” which Stalin linked to “foreign imperialism” (Werth 23) are not situated within the context of Stalin’s persecution campaigns and witch hunts throughout the Soviet Union. These essays prompt larger questions that are not fully addressed in the volume. If the combined deaths in Ukraine and Kazakhstan comprised 5.5 million (Graziosi 93), and 6.5–7.5 million deaths occurred in the Soviet Union (Graziosi, Sysyn 1) why were Kazakhs “the main victims of the 1931–33 pan-Soviet famine” (Pianciola 112)? If famine in Russia is under-researched, where do figures claiming that “hundreds of thousands of Russians” died in famine come from in comparison to figures stating that deaths comprised “more than one third of the USSR’s Kazakhs [and] at least a fifth of Ukrainians” (Pianciola 107)? Can scholarly comparisons of

Chinese, Ukrainian, and Kazakhstan famines that give only passing mention to the famine in Russia be explained by a political cause, that is, a justification of the independence of nationality, as Felix Wemheuer has demonstrated with regard to the memory of the Ukrainian and Tibetan famines (195)?

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