

Aftermath of the Famine: 1922–1923¹

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Hunger was a major cause of the Russian revolution and a major factor in all Soviet politics. The Russian revolution started with hunger riots in Petrograd in February 1917 and food concerns dominated popular discourse during almost the whole interwar period in the USSR.

1917–1922 saw the collapse of Russian economy. By the end of the Civil War industrial production had fallen to one-fifth of the 1913 level. Agricultural output fell to about one-half of what it had been. Although the Bolshevik government claimed that the catastrophic condition of the country was a result of the war and counterrevolution, most Russians also blamed the government's economic and terror policies, known as War Communism, and general inability to deal with the situation. "If you can't provide bread, then stop governing" – it was a common refrain.² The leaders, fearing for their power, were forced by the economic situation and mass revolts in Kronstadt, Tambov and Siberia to change the destructive policy of War Communism in March 1921 and turn to the New Economic Policy (NEP). But the effect of this retreat was not revealed in 1921; by summer the country was afflicted by a terrible famine. Depopulation, as a result, continued up to 1922. 1923 is considered to be the period when Civil War battles were already history, the country was in reconstruction, NEP was well established and the famine had receded. However, when we look at 1923 more closely – for exam-

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² Donald J. Raleigh, *A Provincial Kronstadt. Popular Unrest in Saratov at the End of the Civil War*, in: *Provincial Landscapes. Local Dimensions of Soviet Power, 1917–1953*, ed. D. J. Raleigh, Pittsburgh 2001, 97.

ple, on the local level – we see that it was too early to speak about pacification and relaxation in society. The country emerged from the catastrophe much more slowly than was represented officially. This paper will focus on the hunger³ in the countryside in 1922 and 1923 that influenced the general recovery and implementation of NEP.

Vladimir Brovkin and Andrea Graziosi argue that “the real Civil War was not between Reds and Whites, but between the state and peasants.”⁴ In this context “the Bolsheviks had survived the Civil War, but had not won it,” as Donald Raleigh echoed.⁵ NEP was the principal concession with its claim to an alliance with the peasantry. Another important concession was a resolution of financial crisis. The end of the war and turn to NEP could not stop inflation. In 1921–1922 the purchasing power of the ruble dropped 140 times. The financial crisis of 1923 known as the “scissors crisis” was the result of the state attempt to reconstruct industry at the expense of the peasantry. To pay the agricultural tax in cash, introduced in 1923, peasants had to sell their crop by at a very low state price. However, industrial prices were three times higher relative to agricultural prices than before World War I.⁶ This amounted to double or triple taxation. The natural reaction of peasants was to curtail their marketing, which in turn threatened economic recovery. In 1923 the Bolsheviks retreated and lowered industrial prices, thus overcoming the worst effects of the “scissors.”

In 1923 beside economic challenges, the Bolshevik party faced political crisis. When Lenin was paralyzed on March 10, a sudden overpowering panic spread at the top. The leaders were scared, waiting for revolts against Soviet power and intervention in case of Lenin’s death.

³ In contrast to the Russian term *golod*, which is quite general, English makes a distinction between famine, involving acute starvation and a sharp increase of mortality demanding speedy intervention and chronic hunger, involving sustained nutritional deprivation on a persistent basis (which does not imply that mass deaths are on the immediate horizon). See Jean Drèze, Amartya Sen, Hunger and Public Action, Oxford 1989, 7. I am thankful to Steve Smith brought this semantic issue to my attention. While sources use the term *golod*, I think that the term hunger is more appropriate to describe the situation in 1923.

⁴ Vladimir N. Brovkin, *Russia after Lenin. Politics, Culture and Society, 1921–1929*, London/New York 1998, 57.

⁵ Raleigh, 104.

⁶ David MacKenzie, Michael W. Curran, *Russia and the USSR in the Twentieth Century*, Wadsworth 2002, 136.

These fears were rooted in an explosion of rumors about coming war and the end of Soviet power reported by OGPU.⁷ By sending ciphered telegrams (Stalin to national republics, Dzerzhinsky to OGPU and Trotsky to the military), the leadership mobilized all the resources of the party, the OGPU, and the army and came close to introducing martial law.⁸ Lenin's departure from politics resulted in a struggle for power at the top and against party opposition.

On May 8th a crisis in Soviet-British relations caused an explosion of new fears at the top. In response to the revolutionizing policy of the *Comintern* in Asia the British Minister for Foreign Affairs Lord Curzon directed ultimatum to the Soviet government, threatening to renounce their trading contract. This moderate form of pressure, quite common in international relations, was interpreted by the Soviets ~~in belligerent terms~~ as a threat of war. At the height of the crisis on May 10th in Lausanne, Soviet diplomat V. V. Vorovsky was assassinated by a Russian emigrant. While satisfying all British demands, the Soviet government ~~interpreted that crisis as a real war threat and~~ initiated a heated propaganda campaign: "Hands off the USSR!" This war scare convinced authorities of the necessity of rapid industrialization and militarization. All these economic and political developments had a grim background which was defined in official discourse as "aftermath of famine".

Any famine is a phenomenon of nature and social life. As such, we can distinguish in any famine natural factors beyond human control – for example, drought – and factors of human management – for example, relief politics, or taxation and price politics. Michael Ellman uses the term *potential* famine when he speaks about a bad harvest. He argues that lack of government action may aggravate potential famine and turn it into *actual* famine.⁹ Mark Tauger called his study *Natural Disaster and Human Actions in the Soviet Famine of 1931–1933*.¹⁰ Cormac Ó Gráda

⁷ Alexei Berelovich/Viktor Danilov, ed., *Sovetskaya derevnya glazami VCHKA-OGPU-NKVD. Dokumenty i materialy*, vol. 2, 1923–1929, Moscow 2000, 78, 82, 84, 86, 91, 93, 98, 99, 126, 144.

⁸ Olga Velikanova, *The Myth of the Besieged Fortress. Soviet Mass Perception in the 1920s–1930s*, Working Paper no. 7, Toronto 2002, 5-7.

⁹ Michael Ellman's presentation at the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies (AAASS) in 2007 "Were the Ukrainians Victims of Genocide in 1933?"

¹⁰ Mark Tauger, *Natural Disaster and Human Actions in the Soviet Famine of 1931–1933*, Carl Beck Papers, University of Pittsburgh Center, no. 1506 (2001).

emphasized the relative importance of political factors in famines during the twentieth century:

“Most of the twentieth century major famines... would have been less murderous, if not entirely avoidable, under more auspicious political circumstances.”¹¹

It's true that the development of modern communication has made information and resources more mobile. Development of the public sphere can play its role in the solution of crises. The political factor in the famine aftermath is the subject of this case study.

Sources

Secret police (VChK, since 1922 OGPU) regular reports on the situation in the country, compiled at the localities, summarized for top rulers and labeled as “Top Secret,” as well as Bolshevik authorities’ documents, including their internal correspondence, complement official Soviet statistics, documents, press and sources from the American Relief Administration. VChK-OGPU reviews and reports (*svodki*) provide a broad panorama of political and economic life in Soviet Russia – statistics, numerous details of everyday life, people’s reactions and moods. This parallel channel of information provides historians with invaluable material about what happened in the localities beyond the formal discourse of decrees, average statistics and propaganda. After a decade of debate on their reliability and representativeness, the academic community agrees that OGPU *svodki*, as well as Communist party *svodki*, are no more biased than most other historical sources; thus, *svodki* are now widely used.¹² They deserve the same scrutiny and critique that histori-

¹¹ Cormac Ó Gráda, Introduction, in: *Food and Foodways*, vol. 12, no. 2-3 (2004) 3-4.

¹² Analysis of these documents can be found in numerous collections published in recent years. I will mention here the special issue of *Russian History/Histoire Russe*, 24, no. 1-2, (1997); S. R. Davies, *Popular Opinion in Stalin’s Russia*, Cambridge 1997; A. Graziosi, *State and Peasants in the Reports of the Political Police, 1918–1922*, in: *A New, Peculiar State. Explorations in Soviet History, 1917–1937*, Westport 2000. My contribution to the discussion is O. Velikanova, *Berichte zur Stimmungslage. Zu den Quellen politischer Beobachtung der Bevölkerung in der Sowjetunion*, in: *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 47, 2 (1999): 227-43.

ans apply to any sources. The evidence of this recognition is the publication of numerous collections of such documents. It is the task of an historian to use the whole complex of all available sources in the reconstruction of the past.

~~In this article I study the factors that contributed to the 1923 food situation: the harvest of 1922 and its governmental estimates; tax and export policies; governmental relief efforts, and the contribution of public organizations and international aid.~~

Famine and Relief Agencies

Two harvest failures in succession in a country devastated by civil war together with Bolshevik wheat requisition policies, led to the terrible hunger of 1921–1922. It afflicted up to 33.5 million people and spread to 40 provinces in the Volga, Don, Ural, North Caucasus and Ukraine. We do not know the exact number of famine victims – up to 5-6 million people died.

In the management of any famine, government plays the leading role. In the modern world, national and international public organizations play a more and more important part. Thanks to social and international cooperation, modern famines may be increasingly controllable.

Despite information coming from the provinces, until July 1921 the Soviet government did not officially recognize the famine. And then, what is called by J. Drèze and A. Sen “public action” played its role “in forcing the hands of the government to act rapidly enough.”¹³ The aid campaign was initiated in June 1921 by a public organization called All-Russian Public Committee to Aid the Hungry. It was organized by the cultural and liberal leaders with the writer Maxim Gor’kii at its head. They articulated the problem and appealed for aid to the public and governments at home and abroad.

The Soviet leaders and Lenin first and foremost, hated and feared any independent public organizations and potential intrusion of foreign organizations into Soviet life, but finally reluctantly accepted foreign aid. They viewed the relief campaign as a strongly political enterprise. The authorities did not hurry to respond to numerous foreign and public

¹³ Drèze, Sen, 276.

inquiries about the situation in summer 1921. The internal language of the Bolshevik leaders showed no evidence of “sympathy of the rulers to the suffering common people” which some historians see as a factor of effectiveness in state relief politics.¹⁴ The Commissar of Foreign Affairs G. V. Chicherin in his notes to L. B. Kamenev and V. M. Molotov in July and August 1921 was concerned mostly about filtering information about the famine and how “to prevent the possible attacks of the world reaction against the Soviets.” Chicherin warned that “an international aid campaign [can] turn into a weapon against us.”¹⁵ But because of pressure from the international community and the Public Committee with personal intervention from Maxim Gor’kii, the Soviet government took steps forward and accepted aid from the Nansen Committee of International Famine Relief in Russia, and then from the American Relief Administration. The ARA was the leading international organization that worked in Russia from August 1921 to June 1923. It fed up to 1 million children and 10 million adults a day and provided about 80 % of all international aid. Religious organizations also took part in the campaign; for example, the Catholic Church.¹⁶ Together these agencies fed in 1922, 14 million people daily. OGPU thoroughly supervised all ARA’s activities, treating its workers as spies. The fourth counterespionage department of OGPU periodically arrested ARA’s Russian employees and intervened in the work of other international organizations.¹⁷

Just before the first ARA mission arrived in Moscow on August 27, 1921, the All-Russian Public Committee was dissolved according to Lenin’s personal order as a counterrevolutionary organization, and its leaders E. D. Kuskova, S. N. Prokopovich, N. M. Kishkin and others were arrested and later exiled.

¹⁴ Igor V. Narskii, *Zhizn’ v katastrofe. Budni naselenia Urala v 1917–1922 gg.*, Moscow 2001, 534.

¹⁵ *Bolshevistskoe Rukovodstvo. Peregovory. 1912–1927*, Moscow 1996, 208-209.

¹⁶ “Berdiansk (Ukraine) got 200 puds of flower and rice – a gift from the Pope. It was distributed among Catholics in their church”, in: *Sovetskaya derevnya*, 66, January 1923.

¹⁷ “Sovershenno sekretno”: *Lubyanka – Stalin i olozhenii v strane (1922–1934)*. vol. 1, part 2, Moscow 2001, 992. About *China* surveillance and repressions see Chapter 26 in Bernard M. Patenaude, *The Big Show in Bololand. The American Relief Expedition to Soviet Russia in the Famine of 1921*, Stanford, *CA*, 2002, 394-411.

The Russian Orthodox Church was another non-government national institution that initiated collection of relief aid in the country. Priests at the local level often organized assistance to their parishes spontaneously and even donated some church valuables. Officially, the church authorities made several formal offers to the government to contribute to the campaign, but got permission for limited activities in cooperation with a government agency only in December 1921.¹⁸ By suppressing the “public action” of Russian society, the Bolsheviks in their striving for monopolization of civic life limited the range of agencies that might work on alleviating the severity of famine. Thus, the only Russian agency to deal with famine remained the government Central Commission of Famine Relief (*Pomgol*) headed by L. B. Kamenev. Control over food for starving people was a power resource. Competition among the soviet government, public organizations and international organizations could have revealed mismanagement by the central and local administrators. As a member of ARA, Harold Fisher, remarked “They did not want to tolerate independent organizations to compete in the business of relief.”¹⁹

~~1922~~ Harvest

On July 20, 1922, good spring weather gave the Commissar for Food Supply N. P. Briukhanov grounds to make very optimistic estimates for a harvest amounting to 2,700 million puds (44 million tons) of grain and potatoes. Trotsky proclaimed good estimates again in August. Many considered these estimates inflated, for example, Nikolai Osinskii – a Deputy Commissar for Food Supply. The Commissariat of Agriculture suspected that the Commissariat of Food Supply was exaggerating the total harvest as a way of collecting more tax in kind.²⁰ On the basis of the independent investigation, the ARA forecasted that the famine regions of the RSFSR, inhabited by approximately 65 % of its total popu-

¹⁸ Dimitii V. Pospelovskii, *Russkaya Pravoslavnaya Tserkov' v XX veke*, Moscow: 1995, 105-6.

¹⁹ Harold H. Fisher, *The Famine in Soviet Russia: Operations of the American Relief Administration, 1919–1923*, New York 1927, 9.

²⁰ James W. Heinzen, *Inventing a Soviet Countryside. State Power and the Transformation of Rural Russia, 1917–1929*, Pittsburgh 2004, 54, 240.

lation would be barely able to produce enough to supply its own requirements.²¹

After these formal claims, the famine was considered to be over and was no longer emphasized in official discourse. It led to premature curtailing of relief policies, more victims, and in the long term “it would take years of concentrated effort and renewed famine assistance in addition to good harvests to bring about a recovery.”²² The optimistic statement by Briukhanov can be placed in the foreign affairs context of consistent attempts of the Soviet government to acquire credits for Russia at the Genoa and the Hague conferences in April-July 1922. Good harvest could improve the country’s image in the international arena, where Russia was perceived as a famine-ridden country, and enhance chances to get foreign loans for reconstruction. These efforts failed at both conferences, but in the domestic arena these estimates, as we’ll see, had long-term consequences. Based on them the government changed the policy of “struggle against the famine” to “struggle against the *consequences* of the famine” and the Central Commission of Famine Relief (*Pomgol*) was reorganized on October 15 as the Commission to Combat the Consequences of the Famine (*Posledgol*) still headed by Kamenev.

According to different estimates, the amount of the real 1922 harvest ranged from 36 to 50 million tons.²³ Stephen Wheatcroft provides analysis of the factors that influenced lack of statistical certainty in the 1920s.²⁴ If it were after a good year, such a harvest was in principle manageable, but the hunger of 1921 caused extended food consumption stress on the population and affected the seed reserves and livestock heavily. A shortage of draft animals,²⁵ agricultural machinery, and seeds

²¹ Fisher, 298.

²² Raleigh, 102.

²³ 50 million tons in Alec Nove, *An Economic History of the USSR* (London: The Penguin Books, 1982), 110; 2,827,000,000 puds (45 million tons) in Fisher, 315; 2,211 million puds (36 million tons) in Roman Serbyn, *The Famine of 1921-23: A Model for 1932-33?*, in: *Famine in Ukraine. 1932-33*, ed. R. Serbyn and B. Krawchenko, Edmonton 1986, 165; and in V. L. Telitsyn, *Vosstanovlenie sel'skogo khozyaistva*, in: *Rossiiia Nepovskaya. Issledovania*, ed. S. A. Pavliuchenkov, Moscow 2002, 100 with the reference to *Sbornik statisticheskikh svedenii po Soiuzu SSR. 1918-1923. Za 5 let raboty TsSU*, Moscow 1924, 131.

²⁴ S. G. Wheatcroft, chapter “Lack of Faith in Statistical Evaluations” in his article “Famines in Russia and China in Historical Perspective” in this volume.

in 1922 led to curtailing the sowing area up to one-half that of 1916²⁶ and resulted in bad prospects for 1923.

The 1922 harvest, of course, varied widely across the country. The real harvest in Ukraine yielded only about half the forecasted amount.²⁷ The harvest in Bashkiria was twice lower than was needed for people's nutrition and seed reserves.²⁸ In addition to the Volga, Southern Ural and Ukraine regions, OGPU reported bad harvests in Siberia, Central region, Georgia, Don, and the North-West. In Samara (Volga) the yield was only 30 % of the normal yield and worse in 1922 than in 1921, as reported by the local Soviet and ARA representatives and the *Izvestia* correspondent.²⁹ These estimates were far less than reported by the *Posledgol* provincial representative. Even more positive were the reports of the Central Statistical Department about consumption of 3,577 kcal per adult per day (about a norm of 3,600 kcal defined by S. G. Strumilin at that time and 2,500 kcal defined as an average norm in the nineteenth century³⁰) in October in Samara rural area.³¹

Official statistics show that consumption rapidly improved in the fall of 1922 and returned to a level of 3,892 kcal per adult per day in February 1923 even in the famine suffering regions – in Saratov rural area and to the level of 2,739 kcal in Saratov itself. There, the mortality from starvation and epidemics went down from a death rate of 168.8 per thousand population in July 1921 to 21.3 and 19.4 in January/February 1923, though it remained higher than the birth rate.³² In contrast, the OGPU information presented a much grimmer picture in the same area reporting on continuing local famines. For example, OGPU reported that 30 %

²⁵ By 1922 the number of cattle had fallen by 30 % of that of 1913 and pigs by one half. R. W. Davies/M. Harrison/S. G. Wheatcroft, *The Economic Transformation of the Soviet Union, 1913–1945*, Cambridge 110.

²⁶ Charles M. Edmondson, *An Inquiry into the Termination of Soviet Famine Relief Programmes and the Renewal of Grain Export, 1922–1923*, in: *Soviet Studies XXXIII*, 3 (July 1981): 375.

²⁷ Serbyn, 168.

²⁸ Narskii, 109 referred to the newspaper *Ural'skii Rabochii*, July 13, 1922.

²⁹ *Izvestia*, January 31, 1923.

³⁰ R. E. F. Smith/David Christian, *Bread and Salt. A Social and Economic History of Food and Drink in Russia*, Cambridge 1984, 330.

³¹ Stephen G. Wheatcroft, *Soviet Statistics of Nutrition and Mortality during Times of Famine 1917–1922 and 1931–1933*, in: *Cahiers du Monde Russe*, 38, 4 Octobre-December (1997), 550.

³² Wheatcroft, *Soviet Statistics*, 529-530, 532, 550, 546.

of total population in Saratov province in January 1923 were starving including 50,000 people in Khvalynsk region, and emphasized that cases of hunger deaths became more frequent there. In April OGPU reported about 808,000 starving people in Saratov province, 72,000 – in Khvalynsk region.³³ We can see the same conflict of information in the case of Bashkiria: statistics reported food consumption of 3,824 kcal per adult in rural areas³⁴ in February 1923, while OGPU reported 838,500 of starving there, including 427,635 children. According to Narskii, by summer 1923 800,000 were starving in Bashkiria.³⁵ In Cheliabinsk province average consumption in February was 3,333 kcal, but by summer 400,000 were starving there.³⁶

The discrepancy in statistics evaluation of consumption and harvest and local information from OGPU, Soviets, ARA and newspapers represents a challenge for historians. Soviet official statistics were always under a strong political pressure. But Stephen Wheatcroft proves convincingly that the Soviet statistics of the early twenties on mortality and food consumption during the famine of 1921–1923 are more reliable than many observers think. Igor Narskii in his study of the Ural region also trusts the statistics of former *zemstvo* workers. Both Wheatcroft and Narskii use publications of the Central Statistical Department. However, a sociologist Pitirim Sorokin who lived in Petrograd in 1920–1921 pointed to the inaccuracy of TsSU data on mortality in Petrograd in 1920.³⁷

Corporate and personal interests might have influenced the data of all agencies collecting information. As we had seen, for ideological and political reasons, the center tended to *overestimate* the harvest. It's also possible that Briukhanov's evaluations of 1922 crops were *biological* crops (standing in the field), which were usually 20-30 % higher than the real harvest.

State employees – statisticians and *Posledgol* representatives – especially in a time of famine, might be under pressure to respond to expect-

³³ See Svodki informotdela GPU o zemledelii... # 4 for 12,12,13,14 January 1923 and # 60/61 for 9, 10, 11 June 1923, in *Sovetskaya derevnya*, 61, 112.

³⁴ Narskii, 614.

³⁵ *Sovetskaya derevnya*, 84; Narskii, 110.

³⁶ Narskii, 110, 614.

³⁷ Pitirim Sorokin, *Vliyanie voyny na sostav naseleniya*, in: *Golod kak factor*, Moscow 2003, 555.

tations at the top, as well as official claims about the end of famine and to demonstrate increases in production and consumption. Statisticians were probably afflicted by famine too. Whether starving by themselves or just observing the disaster, they would hold on to their own rations and privileges as state employees. Sorokin showed in his sociological study that hunger depressed religious, legal, and moral norms,³⁸ lifting bans on much more than moral compromise. Hungry people are very manipulative. Local soviet and party authorities were prone to *underestimate* the crops in order to diminish taxation quotas and to *overestimate* the number of hungry in order to get more resources from the center. Peasants tended to *understate* their harvest and consumption. The center was aware of that and distrusted local estimates. As Wheatcroft showed, in a situation of increased politicization of harvest estimates,

“officials, ... suspecting that peasants were concealing their real scale of harvest began adding correction coefficients to the figures that they were given”³⁹

and I would add, probably not once and on all levels of hierarchy. Members of the Central Statistical Department later admitted distortion of the 1922 harvest in order to compensate for traditional local underestimates. Strumilin in *Gosplan* maintained that the crop was exaggerated by 35 %.⁴⁰ In 1926 an Expert council formally approved upward distortions overall by more than 20 %.⁴¹ Inaccurate information that government had about the local harvests, impeded relief policies and contributed to famine.⁴²

The OGPU, too, was not immune to bias. In principle, the OGPU information was designed to provide the “real” picture of situation in the country and to fill the gaps in official representation. Naturally, *svodki* were focused on negative information which bureaucrats avoided to provide up. In the correspondence about the function of the OGPU surveillance, OGPU chef F. E. Dzerzhinskii wrote to his deputy G. G. Yagoda:

³⁸ Sorokin, Golod 211-219.

³⁹ Wheatcroft, *Famines in Russia*, 26-7.

⁴⁰ Edmondson, 374-75, 380.

⁴¹ Wheatcroft, *Famines in Russia*, 26-7.

⁴² Narskii described the conflict of local Viatka **Pomgol** and the center about estimations of the harvest, 366.

“*Svodki* make a very depressing impression – the total darkness without light spot ... How to check their truthfulness?” Yagoda answered:

“Our task is to reflect the shadow side ... and hence, naturally, our *svodki* give generally a very ‘grim picture’... Up to now there were no attempts to dispute the reliability of our information ...”⁴³

However, OGPU was subject to all ills of any bureaucratic structure, for example, considerations of the expectations on the top. For example, OGPU summary of popular reactions on Lenin’s death designed for the top, contained no negative comments that were very numerous in the local *svodki*.⁴⁴ Comparing local *svodki* and reports for top rulers, we can see that latter underestimated the numbers of the hunger and its territory.⁴⁵

In interpreting the sources, the historian has to navigate among these biases. Probably in the case of official data on consumption we deal with the distortion that occurs with average readings, which are often called “sly.” Statistics dealt with average figures in provinces where regions suffered unevenly from crop failure and rural population was significantly differentiated socially, with the poor much more vulnerable to starvation. All *svodki* emphasized that it was mostly the poor, who were starving. Geographical and class pockets of famine existed due to limited circulation of available resources among areas and among individuals aggravated by disrupted market network, weakly monetized economy and conditions of natural/subsistence economy. This disparity of data needs further research, but we have no right to ignore the evidence only because it contradicts to other information.

Reports of famine in fall 1922

Official statistics demonstrated radical improvement of the food situation after the harvest of 1922 both in cities and (especially) in the coun-

⁴³ Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial’no-politicheskoi istorii (RGASPI) f.76, op.3, d.351, ll.4-5; February 15, 1925.

⁴⁴ O. Velikanova, The Public Perception of the Cult of Lenin Based on Archival Materials, Lewiston 2001, 24; Neizvestnaya Rossia. XX vek. Arhivy. Pis’ma. Memuary, no. 4, Moscow, 1994, 9-21.

⁴⁵ Sovetskaya derevnya, introduction by V. Danilov, N. Werth and A. Berelovitch, 13.

tryside. The number of the starving and mortality decreased dramatically. Trade revived. OGPU also reported that the popular mood had become better.

This improvement was accompanied by a phenomenon the authorities called as a barbarous. Instead of the Great Hunger there was the “Great Thirst”. In fall 1922 *svodki* reported a bacchanalia of drunkenness in the countryside. Having waited for the harvest as a salvation, peasants distilled precious grain into home-brew.

The Bolsheviks retained the Old Regime ban on vodka and on home-brewing until 1922. Through 1921–1923 the state gradually reintroduced the sale of alcohol.⁴⁶ Finally in February 1923 the sale of liquors of 20 % alcohol was permitted as a state monopoly.

Home-brewing was a common reaction of people during “Prohibition.” Mass revelry and debauchery took place in periods of rapid and critical changes – following the October Revolution; changes of regimes in the Civil War. The epidemic reached its peak in fall 1922 at the end of mass famine and its scale was grandiose. Whole regions and villages were reported “moonshining” and drinking heavily. If in old village tradition drinking was allowed on holidays and mostly for males, now it happened anytime and spread to all social layers, genders and ages, sometimes up to 80 % of the population,⁴⁷ As the *svodka* from June 1923 stated,

“the struggle against drunkenness is extremely weak, as in many provinces drunkenness has become epidemic among members of the local soviets, village militia, Communists and other representatives of power (Tambov, Mari, Krasnoyarsk, Nishegorodskaya province, Tatar republic).”⁴⁸

This orgy seemed irrational as peasants wasted grain necessary for their survival through winter and spring. Possible explanation is that alcohol was a means to fall into oblivion, to escape anxiety. Drinking was a kind of biological and psychological compensatory mechanism of relaxation after the long and terrible stress of experiencing numerous deaths. We can also see this heavy drinking as part of a general process

⁴⁶ Neil Weissman, *Prohibition and Alcohol Control in the USSR: The 1920s Campaign against Illegal* [redacted] *is*, in: *Soviet Studies* 3 (July 1986): 354.

⁴⁷ *Sovetskaya derevnya?* 58, 62, 63, 76; *Narskii*, 376.

⁴⁸ “Sovershenno sekretno,” vol. 1, part 2, 895.

of barbarization of society, together with decay of traditional religious and social bonds, demoralization, criminalization, and even cannibalism.

Some villagers applied to authorities to legalize home-brew: “From the peasants. We, peasants, the guardians and avant-garde of Soviet power, ask the central power to provide [us] some degree of freedom, in order to lighten the heavy burden on us of local power and to take into account the harsh economic conditions of our life. They persecute peasants for *samogon* (moonshining). But the poor peasant distills home-brew not for sale, but for entertainment in his life full of heavy work.”⁴⁹

Other peasants justified “moonshining” by the need to pay taxes – to sell vodka produced from two puds of grain was more profitable than to sell 10-15 puds of grain. Many “moonshined” in order to exchange vodka for grain.⁵⁰ It was quite rational peasants’ reaction on low state grain price in 1923 (and again in 1927) to turn grain into more marketable commodity. Vodka even played a role of village currency. In their campaign against illegal distilling, the authorities specifically attacked distilling for sale as a peasants’ maneuver to escape grain taxation. To prevent this waist of grain in June 1922 the government banned the home-brew for sale.⁵¹ Peasants also referred to the total drunkenness of the local Communists and Soviet workers, whose function was in principle to restrain extremes of human behavior and maintain order. In the absence of external restraints, especially when religious and moral bans lost their strength, peasants were lured into the sin of heavy drinking.

In fact, in a situation of universal drinking, struggle against home-brew was senseless. Numerous enlightened publications in newspapers had no effect. In winter 1922/1923 two-week anti-alcohol campaigns were organized in the country. “In December militia persecuted 478 bootleggers in ten regions of Smolensk province.” In March 1923 in Vologda province “militia confiscated 468 brew-devices, 1,7 thousand vodka buckets, conducted 1,506 searches and opened 1,840 cases.”⁵² The report emphasized that local soviets and Communist party organizations avoided cooperation with the militia. Only the spring sowing campaign and exhaustion of grain reserves, together with the beginning of

⁴⁹ RGASPI f. 17, op. 84, l. 254.

⁵⁰ Sovetskaya derevnya, 65-7; Patenaude, *The Big Show*, 559.

⁵¹ Neil Weissman, 353.

⁵² Sovetskaya derevnya, 65, 74.

legal vodka sales in February 1923, rather than the struggle against drunkenness relatively decreased the alcohol orgy in the countryside. In May the number of “drunken” provinces decreased from 44 in March to 22.⁵³

Despite general revival, in many areas harvest did not bring improvement to peasants. In addition to geographical pockets of hunger due to local crop failures, hunger persisted among the more vulnerable strata of peasantry – the poor – even in more successful areas. In August 1922 newspapers continued publishing local reports about hunger. In Southern Ukraine, especially Nikolaev and Ekaterinoslav provinces, hunger was reported in September 1922. In October 1922 OGPU reported hunger in the Volga area (in Mari region), in the North (Murmansk), in Don, Tver’ and Orenburg provinces (25,000 people). In November-December hunger spread to new areas in Ukraine and in the North-West.⁵⁴ The *Izvestia* correspondent on October 14 criticized the abolishing of *Pomgol* as the threat of famine still hung over many regions of Russia and Ukraine.

Estimates of the total number of starving differed. The newspaper *Bednota* published on November 15 the number of 5 million people under the threat of starvation. In September 1922 the American National Information Bureau after its independent investigation in Russia, informed ARA that about eight million people may be starving in 1923 if the relief program were curtailed.⁵⁵ On October 20, 1922, ARA representatives and Soviet officials discussed international aid and continuation of the relief program. Kamenev confirmed at this meeting that by November 1 about 4,300,000 people would need food assistance and by January about 8 million would require help.⁵⁶

Hunger in 1923

On February 1 and 2, 1923 *Izvestia* publicized that hunger did exist in 14 provinces and 3-4 million people were starving (*golodaiut*). OGPU

⁵³ “Sovershenno sekretno,” vol. 1, part 2, 895; *Sovetskaya derevnya*, 426.

⁵⁴ “Sovershenno sekretno,” vol. 1, part 1, 304, 371, 381, 325, 351, 521, 355; vol. 1, part 2, 530.

⁵⁵ Benjamin M. Weissman, Herbert Hoover and Famine Relief to Soviet Russia: 1921–1923, Stanford, Calif., 1974, 149.

⁵⁶ Fisher, 315.

secretly reported to the leadership a much worse situation. On January 23, it reported hunger in 28 provinces, and in spring – in 32 provinces and republics; in many up to 30 % of the population were starving, and at best only 20 % got some aid.⁵⁷ Only 15 provinces estimated the numbers of the starving – totaling 1,850,000 – others only stated the fact of hunger or percentage of population afflicted by it (see table). In January 1923

“Donbass reported 400,000 famine victims at the conference held in Kharkov under the chairmanship of Nansen with representatives of the Ukrainian government and TsK *Posledgol*. Rakovsky revealed ... that one third of Ukraine was once more in the grip of the famine and the situation was worse than it had been in the Volga region a year earlier.”⁵⁸

Saratov province remained the hunger zone. As of January 1923, 28,5 percent of the population of Dergachev, 18,5 percent in Novouzensk and Khvalynsk had perished.⁵⁹ In spring and summer about 50 % of the population in these regions were starving according to OGPU reports. Khvalynsk region had 72,000 starving adults and they received from *Pomgol* only ten pounds of food per person in April.⁶⁰ Cases of death were reported in Tiumen’ province, and in the Tatar and Bashkir republics. In June OGPU reported about 26 provinces and republics afflicted by famine and epidemics of black smallpox and typhus. Diseases spread among up to 12 % of the population.⁶¹ The harvest did not change the general situation. The yield of 1923 according to OGPU information was estimated as below average or poor in the majority of regions and decreased in part by vermin. Regional famine was reported in September in 31 provinces – in the North-West, Siberia, Volga and part of the Center – and in 35 provinces in November.⁶²

Except for high mortality, all famine attributes – “surrogate” consumption, swelling, panic migration, and diseases like scurvy, were present in 1923. Using of food substitutes was common practice in famine zones. People added grass, bark, clay, ground bones to their food, consumed cats, dogs, rats and mice. For example, in Aktubinsk province

⁵⁷ Sovetskaya derevnya, 426.

⁵⁸ Serbyn, 166.

⁵⁹ Raleigh, 100.

⁶⁰ “Sovershenno sekretno,” vol. 1, part 2, 112.

⁶¹ Ibid., 894.

⁶² Ibid., 912-913, 938.

(Kirgis area) hungry peasants of Andreevskii village, Sazdinskii district, did not allow the inspector to poison gophers as vermin and said that they consumed them and even made preserves from them for winter.⁶³ Because of malnutrition, scurvy spread everywhere including the Red Army, which had a priority in food supply. Peasants migrated in panic from famine areas – from Zyriansk, North-Dvinsk, Vologda, Murmansk, Terskaya, Irkutsk provinces and from Siberia and the Far East. Because of lack of food peasants from Karelia fled to Finland.⁶⁴ Homeless children roamed the country: only in Bashkiria in December 1922 there were 75-100,000 *besprizorniki*, and 12,000 in Orenburg province.⁶⁵

Famine in spots continued through 1924 when crop failure spread to 24 provinces inhabited by from 8 million (recognized by the government) to 12 million people.⁶⁶ Only a good harvest in 1925 stopped chronic shortage of food, but for a short period. In 1927–1929 it resumed.

⁶³ Sovetskaya derevnya, 436.

⁶⁴ “Sovershenno sekretno,” vol. 1, part 2, 938, 912; Sovetskaya derevnia, vol. 2, 167.

⁶⁵ Narskii, 144, 106.

⁶⁶ “Sovershenno sekretno”, vol. 2, part 2, 16. Also Mark Tauger’s presentation at AAASS 2007 “The Unknown 1924 Famine.”

Starving Provinces/republics January 1923	Area	Thousand people	Incl children	Consumption City/rural in February	February Thousand people	March Thousand people	April-May Thousand people
Orenburg ****	South	25					
Voronezh	Center	25	Children	3,748/3,723	25%		
Omsk	Siberia		Children				
Tumen'	Siberia	10	Children		8,7**		45
Irkutsk	Siberia				15		10
Altai	Siberia						
Omsk	Siberia						6**
Tatar	Volga			/3,153	117*	278 **	65%**
Tsaritsyn	Volga	145					45
Simbirsk	Volga						
Saratov	Volga	50 (30%)*		2,739/3,862			808
German Commune	Volga	170	78 (72 ARA)	/3,893	170	30%	Hunger
Chuvash	Volga	178,880	40	/3,493	171	220	379
Samara	Volga			3,104/3,488			Hunger
Mari	Volga						55
Vologda	North						Hunger
Pskov	N-West						15%
Arkhangelsk	North						Hunger
Karelia Commune	N-West						0,8
Votkinsk	Ural						Hunger
Bashkiriya	Ural	73	58	/3,824	838***	34%**	800

Chelyabinsk	Ural	29	14	/3,333			400 (50% Children)
Ural province	Ural		70(ARA)		12		20
Kurgan region (uezd)	Ural		14,100		29,565		
Ekaterinoslav	Ukraine	90	10	3,401/4,516	45	30	
Khar'kov	Ukraine	2	0.7	3,398/4,104			
Taganrog	Ukraine	70	88				
Armenia	South	30%			30%		
Crimea	South	10					Hunger
Fergana area	Central Asia						487 in Nov 23

Starving Provinces and Republics (32) in January- May 1923 according to incomplete data of OGPU and ARA.

Sources: Alexei Berelovich, Viktor Danilov, eds., *Sovetskaya derevnya glazami VChK-OGPU-NKVD. Dokumenty i materialy*, vol. 2, 1923–1929, Moscow 2000; “*Sovershenno sekretno*”: *Lubyanka – Stalinu o polozhenii v strane (1922–1934)*. vol. 1, part 2, Moscow 2001; Igor V. Narskii, *Zhizn' v katastrofe. Budni naselenia Urala v 1917–1922 gg.*, Moscow 2001, 378, 106; Harold H. Fisher, *The Famine in Soviet Russia: Operations of the American Relief Administration, 1919–1923*, New York 1927.

- * “Cases of hunger deaths became more frequent.”
- ** 26/45/97 cases of hunger deaths
- *** including 427,635 children
- **** 115,000 starving people at the end of 1922.

State Aid

In the situation of scarce resources, state aid to the starving was limited. In February 1921 the government allocated ten million gold rubles for the purchase of food and basic necessities for needy workers.⁶⁷ In desperate deficit, the government turned to other resources. Despite voluntary church donations to *Pomgol*, a campaign of confiscation of church valuables was organized according to Lenin's order in March 1922. In his letter to V. M. Molotov he shrewdly figured that hungry people would not be able to vigorously resist attacks on the church.⁶⁸ This campaign served a twofold goal: to raise money for food and to undermine the position and influence of the Orthodox Church. Confiscated church valuables were melted in order to purchase food. In this campaign about 21 puds of gold and 23,000 puds of silver plus precious stones and pearls were confiscated.⁶⁹ In absence of strict control, a lot of valuables were stolen by Church functionaries. On the whole, this resource appeared to be not as large as expected. For example, food purchased after confiscation in Cheliabinsk province could feed about 10,000 people while the total number of starving there was much more than 100,000.⁷⁰

Assistance to peasants in 1922 included: creating committees of mutual help; providing livestock loans for the Volga area; seed loans; organizing kitchens and grain redistribution (from kulaks to the local poor). But it was absolutely insufficient. As Edmondson showed, the *Posledgol* Commission organized in October 1922, in contrast to the *Pomgol* Commission, mainly planned and supervised relief activities, shifting the actual work to locals. The latter were short of money, relied mostly on charity and at best 17.3 % of expenses were covered by the center. In January 1922 the state forwarded 2,1 million puds of seed to the countryside, but it was one-sixth of what was needed. Seed loans of a five million puds established in July 1922 were far too small to achieve noteworthy results. Loans had high interest – sometimes up to 50 % – and peasants often refused them. Because of the collapse of transporta-

⁶⁷ Louis H. Siegelbaum, *Soviet State and Society between Revolutions, 1918–1929*, Cambridge 1992, 77.

⁶⁸ V. I. Lenin, Letter to V. M. Molotov and the members of Politburo, March 19, 1922, *Izvestia TsK KPSS*, 49 (1990):190-93..

⁶⁹ Pospelovskii, 106.

⁷⁰ Narskii, 161.

tion, seeds often were not delivered in time or in full. This led to a record decrease of sown area: in famine areas up to 50 % and up to 69 % in Samara province. Loans enabling peasants to purchase horses were not large and money was released so suddenly that the prices of horses more than tripled. Public works projects remained mostly on paper, funding for machinery purchases was meager – 69.9 million *sovznaks* (a currency).⁷¹ In January 1923 the meeting of the Central Committee of *Posledgol* discussed the sharp decrease in relief aid while the number of people in need grew rapidly.⁷² In summer and fall of 1923, police reports continually recognized that hunger areas had no aid at all. After ARA terminated its mission in June 1923 and the government shifted relief work to local authorities, any aid actually stopped.

Shortage of revenue resources and the estimates of the 1922 harvest became grounds for imposition of a full burden of taxes on peasants and renewal of grain export.

Taxes

The introduction of a tax instead of arbitrary requisition was a major part of NEP. According to the decree, tax should be less than requisitions. New taxes were defined in 1921 in different areas as around 45 % lower than the requisitions of 1920 and later were reduced to 10 % of the harvest.

As a result of the “great fiscal effort” (Graziosi) in 1922/23 the state got 366 million pud of grain as taxes.⁷³ A unified natural tax was introduced in March 1922 and its sum decreased to 5.9 (from 6.3 in 1921/22) rubles from a head and to 15.5 % (from 17.8 %) of income.⁷⁴ Victor Danilov argued that it was lower than requisitions and lower than pre-war taxation level, but after the war, agriculture was at its lowest point. OGPU materials and local studies bring perspective from the bottom.

First of all, taxes varied in consuming and producing provinces, between famine and non-famine areas. In 1921, the taxes in famine areas

⁷¹ Edmondson, 377–378; *Sovetskaya derevnya*, vol. 2, 58; Telitsyn, 98–99.

⁷² *Izvestia VTsIK*, 1923, January 17, 25.

⁷³ V. P. Danilov, “Sovetskaya nalogovaya politika,” in *Oktiabr’ i sovetskoe krestianstvo* (Moscow: Nauka, 1977), 171–90.

⁷⁴ 7 % of income for poor, 14 % – for middle and 24 % for strong households. Telitsyn, 107; Danilov, 178.

were remitted. To compensate for this, in the consuming provinces taxes in 1921 were higher than requisitions, because the total amount of tax in the country was not decreased. For example, taxes in 1921/22 were 10 % and 12 % in Nizhegorodskaya and Viatskaya provinces while the assigned requisitions in such consumer areas amounted on average to 8.4 %. Tax was higher than requisitions in some regions of Ekaterinburg province.⁷⁵ Obviously after catastrophe of War Communism and then famine any taxes were unbearable. Excessive taxation was common the peasants' outcry. In the eyes of many peasants taxes were unfair, "Why is it that under War Communism we paid 20 puds of grain and now under the tax system 200 puds?" "Why is the tax now three times as high as under the tsar?" – they asked at the local congresses of soviets.⁷⁶ They were so overstrained, that all visitors to the village – ethnographers, doctors or agronomists – caused peasants to fear that the visit could only be connected to the imposition of a new tax.⁷⁷ OGPU endlessly reported cases when peasants after taxes remained absolutely without bread. To compensate for a lack of grain, they paid taxes in seed funds or livestock, or sold tools.⁷⁸

If taxes were waived in 1921/22 in areas afflicted by famine, in fall 1922/23 there was no such policy of cancellation even in the Volga area. However, in 1922 and 1923 in some areas, for example in the North-West, taxes were reduced for poor peasants – three percent of all households in 1922/23 and 14 % – in 1923/24. The families of Red Army soldiers got some tax privileges, but these privileges often were ignored by grain collectors. Taxes fell on all districts including those entirely devastated, for example the Volga area.⁷⁹ ARA reported on collection of grain taxes in Pugachev– the worst district in Volga after the 1922 harvest. *Izvestia* from October 1922 also confirmed that famine areas were not immune from taxation. A special *Posledgol* one percent tax levied for famine relief was introduced for all the able-bodied population, excluding households of single housewives and households without live-

⁷⁵ Telitsyn, 106; Narskii, 108.

⁷⁶ Brovkin, 64-5.

⁷⁷ William B. Husband, "Godless Communists." *Atheism and Society in Soviet Russia. 1917–1932*, Illinois 2000, 133.

⁷⁸ "Sovershenno sekretno", vol. 1, part 1, 383, 390; vol. 1, part 2, 894; *Sovetskaya derevnya*, vol. 2, 77, 83; Narskii, 357.

⁷⁹ "Sovershenno sekretno", vol. 1, part 1, 357.

stock. It was extracted also in famine areas, but in one-half the amount. Land officials, as well as ARA representatives argued that famine would again threaten if taxation policies were not managed properly.⁸⁰ As a result of harsh fiscal policy, in many areas (Buriat oblast', Vitebsk, Omsk, Tambov, Samara province) hunger started immediately after paying taxes.⁸¹ OGPU reported numerous cases of tax collectors ruining the peasants households by confiscations.⁸²

Secondly, chaos in tax assessment aggravated the situation. In Yaroslavl province in 1923 the taxes were equal to yield.⁸³ ARA representative in Tsaritsyn stated in September 1922 that the government had assessed the district of Nikolaevsk an amount that exceeded the total crop of the area. The ARA inspector concluded that “any tax whatsoever on the district is unjust and even criminal.”⁸⁴ From Simbirsk area, people complained that in 1922 with a moderate harvest the tax was assessed 30 % more than in 1919 with a good harvest. The ARA representative warned that

“If the tax was higher than the district could stand, and the government cut down its own relief (in absence of ARA), famine conditions would surely reappear...”⁸⁵

“The tax in kind for Ukraine in 1922 was set on the basis of an estimated harvest. Despite... the real harvest yielded only about half the forecasted amount, the old tax remained in force.”

The real harvest in Bashkiria in 1921 was only about half the estimations.⁸⁶ “Tambov food supply officials [1920–1921] never had accurate information on population, crop size, available surpluses...” The same way the harvest was assessed by a local tax commission *by eye* in 1933 as described by the writer Mikhail Sholokhov in his famous letter to Stalin. The members of the commission could not even distinguish millet from weeds. They overestimated the harvest significantly to please

⁸⁰ Heinzen, 54.

⁸¹ “Sovershenno sekretno”, vol. 1, part 2, 962; Sovetskaya derevnya, vol. 2, 69.

⁸² Sovetskaya derevnya, vol. 2, 57, 64, 69, 77.

⁸³ Ibid., 913.

⁸⁴ Weissman, 144.

⁸⁵ Fisher, 310.

⁸⁶ Serbyn, 168; Narskii, 103.

the *Kraikom* [area party committee – O.V.].⁸⁷ The official statistics of harvest, increased average consumption and decreased mortality in 1922 provided the foundation for imposition of high taxes.

Thirdly, the principle of imposition of tax as percent of income/harvest in practice was often substituted by a quota principle. The idea of taking into account the condition of agriculture was not realized. The statist principle of requisitions: “no matter how heavy the requisitions can be for local inhabitants ... state interests must anyway come first”⁸⁸ remained in force. In 1922–1923 tax quotas were still established based on the needs of the state, ignoring the ability of peasants to pay. Narskii quoted an instruction to the Soviet functionaries of Cheliabinsk from October 1921 to collect so much food from hungry peasants as necessary to provide each functionary 10 pounds of flour, 20 pounds of potato, 1-2 pounds of butter and 5 pounds of cabbage per month.⁸⁹ The high collection norms were established for hungry peasants to supply the army and towns – industrial and administrative centers and consuming North-West area. Government put forth long term goals to develop a strong militarized economy instead of short term needs – the recovery of agriculture.

Despite elimination of requisitions at the 10th Congress of the Communist Party, collection of taxes was of a confiscatory nature. “The machinery for collecting the tax in kind was extremely unwieldy” as an observer remarked.⁹⁰ The methods of collecting taxes in many cases remained as violent as during the War Communism. Very often the agents of the Commissariat of Food were the same people who participated in requisitions. Many saw the NEP as a cheating maneuver or temporary measure and continued old tactics. Observers reported arbitrariness of local officials who taxed according to their own whim.⁹¹ In order to camouflage the nature of continuing violent seizures, local au-

⁸⁷ Mikhail A. Sholokhov, “Ya videl takoe, chto nel’zia zabyt’ do smerti.” Letter to I. V. Stalin, April 4, 1933, in: *Sud’by Rossiiskogo krestianstva*, ed. Y. N. Afanasiev, Moscow 1996, 541; Delano DuCarm, *Local Politics and the Struggle for Grain in Tambov, 1918-21* in: *Provincial Landscapes*, 80.

⁸⁸ Decision adopted by procurements commissars in August 1920. Graziosi, *A New, Peculiar State*, 78.

⁸⁹ Narskii, 528.

⁹⁰ Siegelbaum, 89.

⁹¹ Husband, 137, DuGarm, 80.

thorities used the euphemism “*nariad*” instead of “*razverstka*” for the confiscation of grain.⁹²²⁶ Both peasants and many local cadres distrusted the new policy “believing the reintroduction of the *razverstka* was only a matter of time.”⁹³²⁷ In hunger areas violence was almost the only way to extract taxes. Taxes routinely were collected by militia, army, special food detachments, courts, tribunals and even cavalry squadrons and exterminating detachments.⁹⁴²⁸

The OGPU reports had a special rubric “*beschinstva*” (outrages) of grain collectors, and continually described different forms of repressions – tortures, arrests, confiscation of clothes and belongings.⁹⁵²⁹ For example, in Vologodskaia province the whole village was arrested; in Gorodets region, Kiriushenskaya district three whole villages were arrested. After arrests, the villages paid taxes very quickly.⁹⁶³⁰ In another place, as the *svodki* inform us, detained peasants protested by singing religious and monarchist anthems. According to general statistics from March to November 1922, 68,623 peasants were arrested in 49 provinces.⁹⁷³¹ Despite numerous facts of collectors’ violence reported by OGPU, the 1924 instructions on reporting noted that “*svodki* report fewer cases of violence by local authorities... then the newspaper *Bednota*.”⁹⁸³² The documents demonstrate that instead of an economic mechanism, the practice of arbitrary confiscations and quotas was maintained at the local level during the first years of NEP. Methods of War Communism which persisted at the grass roots level in relations between state and peasantry, together with the lack of extra products for sale after paying taxes in many regions and discriminating grain price policy do not allow us to observe the benefits of NEP in significant scale at least until 1923.

Svodki report extensively about rumors that circulated in the countryside. The authorities’ deep concern about rumors, emphasized in OGPU instructions, attempts to suppress rumors, revealed the important

⁹² The letters of the member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party A. G. Beloborodov from the South in April 1922 to V. I. Lenin. *Bolshevistskoe Rukovodstvo*, 202-3.

⁹³ Raleigh, 102.

⁹⁴ Briukhanov’s telegram from June 24, 1922 on using regular army during tax collection see in Telitsyn, 108.

⁹⁵ “Sovershenno sekretno”, vol. 1, part 1, 282, 286 (1922); vol. 1, part 2, 963.

⁹⁶ “Sovershenno sekretno”, vol. 1, part 1, 331(1923); Telitsyn, 108 (1922).

⁹⁷ Telitsyn, 107-108.

⁹⁸ *Sovetskaya derevnya*, 70.

function of this particular phenomenon of traditional society. Rumors in the peasant world played a role of public opinion in civic society. The leit-motif of the rumors was that Soviet power would soon collapse. Many interpreted this forecast to mean that there is no sense to pay taxes. Another dominating narrative in 1920–1923 as well as in 1932–1933 were rumors about the *intentional* policy of the state to starve peasants. Andrea Graziosi suggests that excessive extractions of grain might have been a *punitive* instrument to villages that failed to pay taxes in full in 1921, similar to the cessation of foodstuff delivery to villages in the Tambov area during *Antonovschina*. Hunger as the inevitable result played its role in suppressing revolts or punishing the nonpayer.⁹⁹ Such considerations had grounds especially in cases when famine afflicted areas of recent anti-Bolshevik revolts – like Tambov. Certainly, Lenin’s statement that hungry peasants were unlikely to resist confiscation of church valuables, showed his awareness that famine weakens protests.¹⁰⁰

Svodki bring numerous examples of anti-tax resistance. This means that in peasants’ eyes the burden of taxes was as bad as requisitions. Peasants blamed the Soviet power for collecting taxes without considering famine and desperate village conditions. Beside mass formal applications to lower taxes,¹⁰¹ anti-tax actions, sometimes armed revolts, took place in 1923 in Amur, Primorskaia, Samara, Tver’, Ekaterinburg, Penza and Baikal, Terskaya provinces and the Tatar Republic.¹⁰² A large Zazeisk armed uprising against atrocious taxes took place in January 1924 in Amur area, involving seven districts and a thousand men army. This area had tax privileges in tsarist Russia and the new burden of taxes was unusual and heavy for peasants – up to 28 % in Svobodnensk and Nerchinsk and to 32 % in Nikolsk-Ussuriisk. A Provisional Government was formed headed by Rodion Chashev. The main demand of its program was “to adjust the taxes to the solvency of the population. Taxes should not damage economic growth.” It was suppressed by OGPU and the Red Army with 1,008 people arrested, 107 wounded and 167

⁹⁹ Graziosi, *A New, Peculiar State*, 81.

¹⁰⁰ Lenin, 190-193.

¹⁰¹ In Nerchinski region, Baikal province, of 14 thousand payees, 12 thousand applied for a decrease. *Sovetskaya derevnya*, vol. 2, 164.

¹⁰² “Sovershenno sekretno”, vol. 1, part 2, 937, 980; *Sovetskaya derevnya*, 194, 167, 1050.

killed.¹⁰³ Another armed uprising in *stanitsa* Solskaia, Terskaia province began on November 15, 1923 when villagers defended local non-payers. It involved 600 Cossacks and was suppressed by an OGPU detachment on December 6.¹⁰⁴ These revolts continued the practice of anti-tax actions begun in 1921, when, for example, whole villages of the Arkhangel'sk province "refused to pay tax in kind because Soviet power did not give anything to us."¹⁰⁵ In 1922 several villages of Kiriushenskaia district collectively refused to pay taxes.¹⁰⁶ In the fall of 1923 an underground "congress" of the representatives of nine villages took place in the Tatar Republic in order to block tax collection.

Many peasants ruined by fiscal policy fled to cities in search of work or resettled with their household in the Siberian taiga, where collectors could not find them. Many who lost households formed the armed peasant bands that grew in 1923. OGPU reported about 43 peasant bands in Ukraine and Volga, particularly in Penza, Astrakhan', Saratov, Tsaritsyn, Don provinces and in the Bashkir republic.¹⁰⁷ Usually officials referred to these groups as banditry and criminals.

Waves of resistance made the government to lower the taxes for the poorest in the fall of 1923. To adjust the quotas to local conditions, in December 1923 local tax commissions were created throughout the country for more accurate assessment of harvest conditions in the regions.¹⁰⁸ Peasants could address complaints to these commissions and to the Commissariat of Finance.

Information from the *svodki* changes our understanding of realities at the beginning of NEP. It is very common in historiography to study NEP and famine separately. New documents allow us to reconsider the conventional interpretation: a quick improvement of the situation in the countryside. The practice of conversion to taxes on a local level during acute famine is not studied enough in the literature.¹⁰⁹ Though in pros-

¹⁰³ Sovetskaya derevnya, 204, 1055.

¹⁰⁴ Sovetskaya derevnya, 1050.

¹⁰⁵ Graziosi, *A New, Peculiar State*, 83.

¹⁰⁶ Telitsyn, 108.

¹⁰⁷ Brovkin, 60; Sovetskaya derevnya, 84.

¹⁰⁸ Sovetskaya derevnya, 1050.

¹⁰⁹ See Siegelbaum, 88-89; Danilov; Graziosi, *A New, Peculiar State*; M. Wehner, *Bauernpolitik im Proletarischen Staat: Bauernfrage als zentrales Problem der sowjetischen Innerpolitik 1921–1928*, Köln/Weimar/Wien 1998, 156. Especially, the history of taxation in the 1920s demands further research. See N. N. Grek-

pect economic change had great importance, in practice, especially in the countryside NEP had slow start. The common resistance of Soviet and party apparatus at the local level, who interpreted NEP as a retreat from socialism, was only one issue. Another issue was the hunger calamity in a huge part of the country. Newly introduced taxes were too high for the devastated countryside and the majority of peasants simply had no extra grain to trade after taxes.¹¹⁰ Only a small part of the successful peasants could appreciate the incentives of NEP and market their surplus. Poor peasants, just survived of hunger, could not even pay taxes without destroying their household. Moreover, according to a loophole in law, local and provincial food organs had the right to block free “exchange” of food if tax collection went down in the region.¹¹¹

Export

During the World War and Civil War when grain production declined from 1916 onwards, the cessation of grain exports released some ten million tons annually for internal consumption.¹¹² In 1922 the Soviet leadership decided to return to grain export because it was the only possible resource for industrialization.

In July 1922, the Food Commissar N. P. Briukhanov claimed that the prospects for the harvest were so good that it would cover the needs of the population and the surplus could be exported.¹¹³ As winter demonstrated, the state could not supply population with food and had no surplus. S. Wheatcroft noted that even in 1924–1926 a surplus for export was unavailable,¹¹⁴ the more so was in 1922. But instead of organizing state reserves, the government turned to export. Briukhanov’s declaration of course had a strong political background and aimed to demonstrate to the world that Soviet economy had recovered enough to be back on the world markets. The goal of the export was to finance the purchase

hova, *Nalogovaya politika v derevne v pervoi polovine 20-h gg.*, in *Discussionnye voprosy rossiyskoi istorii*, Arzamas 1998.

¹¹⁰ Such comments of local Chelyabinsk GPU see in Narskii, 357.

¹¹¹ Telitsyn, 96-7.

¹¹² Davies et al., 110.

¹¹³ *Izvestia*, July 21, 1922.

¹¹⁴ Wheatcroft, *Famines in Russia*, 15-6.

of tools and machinery for industrial recovery, especially of mines, and to extend industrialization and reconstruction.¹¹⁵

The Soviet decision to resume export of grain was announced at the Hague Conference, where the USSR failed to get any loans. The announcement threatened the foreign relief operations. It put ARA in a difficult situation and bewildered its sponsors abroad. The head of ARA Herbert Hoover made a statement about the priority of rescuing people over industrialization.¹¹⁶ In the following negotiations Kamenev – a head of *Pomgol* – emphasized the insignificant amount of grain designed for export which anyway could not resolve the food crisis.

According to R.W. Davies, the grain export was 729,000 tons in 1922/23 (and 45 million puds or 737,100 tons according to Fisher). It was more than in 1924/25, 1927/28, 1929 and the same as in 1934.¹¹⁷ It was more than all food furnished to Russia through ARA in 1921/23 (709,507 tons).¹¹⁸ In 1923/24 2,576,000 tons were exported – the largest amount in the decade. Soviet authorities even recognized that some of this grain was extracted in the areas close to famine regions. Fisher described a case in Odessa port in January 1923 when Russian grain was loaded for export and simultaneously a foreign ship was offloading food for starving Russians. Arson of an elevator with grain destined for export in Nikolaev port happened in April 1923.¹¹⁹ But the Soviet government continued exporting even facing the risk that Hoover would curtail relief operations. Finally, ARA made the decision to continue its work, but to reduce the scale of aid.¹²⁰

Conclusion

First. The conventional historiography maintains that famine ended and recovery of agriculture started from October 1922. Official statistics showed the consumption rate was higher than normal. The most important sign of recovery was a decrease of mortality. Deaths from hunger in 1923 were in the dozens, rather than in the thousands (see table). But the

¹¹⁵ Discussion of harvest estimates and decision on export see in Edmondson, 380-2.

¹¹⁶ Weissman, 142-4.

¹¹⁷ Davies et al., 316.

¹¹⁸ Fisher, Table II, 554.

¹¹⁹ Fisher, 301, 310, 311.

¹²⁰ Weissman, 134, 142-4.

country's economic collapse was so deep that the turn to NEP and the harvest of 1922 could not improve the situation immediately. *Svodki* together with local studies demonstrate that acute shortages of food and starvation (*golodanie*) continued in 1923 in many parts of Russia – in 32 provinces in the spring and in 35 in the fall – and afflicted more than 2,568,800 people in April-May 1923 (see table). ARA agents reported about 5,000,000 starving on the Volga and in the Ukraine in May.¹²¹ The major cause of repetition of the hunger scenes was reduction of sowing area plus livestock, local crop failures in 1922 together with the disruption of transportation and distribution systems. However, the government's non-recognition of the situation, evidenced by its overly optimistic estimates of the 1922 harvest, followed by its politics of overtaxation and export also played a role in continuing the food crisis. This crisis could have been at least softened if the moderate harvest had remained in the country and taxation policy had been more flexible. Another factor aggravating the dire situation was traditional Russian arbitrariness on the local level.

OGPU *svodki* and local studies supplying new material on severe food shortages in 1923 and conflicting with official statistics, attract new attention to the aftermath of famine and stimulate further studies of, for example, documents from local *Posledgol* organizations.

Possessing very limited resources the Soviet government prioritized relocation of the reserves in favor of industry.¹²² In spring 1923 fear of imperialist invasion pushed authorities to industrialize and militarize as soon as possible. Fear of inner revolts (articulated in top party documents during Lenin's illness in March 1923) made them keep careful surveillance on workers and peasants. The Bolsheviks saw workers as the most revolutionary force in society, capable of removing them from power. Resuming export in order to increase the share of resources available to industry at the expense of peasantry, Bolsheviks tried to secure their power in the industrial centers.¹²³ Discriminatory taxation and misbalance of agricultural and industrial prices were the means of draining resources from hungry village in favor of city and resulted in repeating cycles of hunger.

¹²¹ Fisher, 332.

¹²² Soviet justification see in Fisher, 324-327.

¹²³ Weatcroft, Famines in Russia, 28.

Second. As we can see from local studies, NEP incentives did not work for the majority of peasants in conditions of famine. Methods of assessment and collection of taxes, as well as amount of dues remained in many cases and in huge areas – the same as under War Communism up to 1923. At the consumer areas levy was often higher than requisitions and in the famine areas even decreased taxes were as catastrophic as requisitions. Analysis of economic practice in the countryside in 1921–1923 moves scholars to reconsider when NEP started working in reality.

Third. Of course, scarcity of resources was the major reason of poor state aid to the starving, but the Bolsheviks' vision of the peasant as "petty-bourgeois," as "*sabotazhnik*" when peasants reduced the sown areas in 1919–1920 in reaction to requisitions,¹²⁴ and as an "inner enemy" when they revolted, may have contributed to relations between the state and its peasants. Interpreting peasants' behavior as "sabotage", Bolsheviks blamed peasants themselves for the famine.

And, paradoxically, some peasants did recognize their guilt. Bernard Patenaude presents interesting evidence about peasants' interpretation of the famine of 1921. Of course the dominant trend was to accuse the Bolsheviks – "the crocodiles who steal our food" – and their policies. But many blamed themselves. According to ARA's worker Corcoran, "in 1921 peasants were burdened with guilt over having reduced their planting in response to government requisitions during the Civil War." Accounts of other ARA workers – Golder and Shafroth – refer to the same way of thinking among peasants:

"Both these moments, the requisitions and the peasants' response to them [by planting only enough to feed themselves], depleted the supply of grain ... and set the stage for the disaster to come. Here is where God intervened. The drought of summer 1920 was His judgment in retribution for leaving the land untilled and, more generally, for lawless behavior during the Revolution. So, on one level the peasants blamed the government while on a deeper level they blamed themselves."¹²⁵

This understanding of the guilty party existed both in the peasant mind and in the Bolshevik mind as evidenced in the official narrative of

¹²⁴ Bernard M. Patenaude, Peasants into Russians: The Utopian Essence of War Communism, in: *The Russian Review*, vol. 54, (October 1995), 559.

¹²⁵ Patenaude, *The Big Show*, 557-558.

“sabotage.” Nicolai Osinski mentioned this view of peasants as natural *sabotazhniki* as popular among local officials in his letter to TsK RKPb.¹²⁶

Fourth. The government policy was exemplary as a model repeated in its main features in the Great Famine of 1932–1933. In both cases center already used the same methods and demonstrated the same priorities. In a famine situation, the government initiated (1922) or continued (1932) grain export. While in 1921–1923 the NEP mechanisms did not yet work in full or in 1928–1932 were already curtailed, it relied on administrative pressure and violence instead of economic instruments. As in 1921–1923, famine in 1932 helped strangle the resistance. Moreover, a narrative of peasant sabotage common in 1932,¹²⁷ had already been used on all levels of the Bolshevik hierarchy in 1921–1922. The experience of 1921–1923 international aid was taken into account in 1932, when Stalin’s fear of foreign spies was complemented by his fear that international aid would make the country more open to the world, revealing government’s failures and harsh policies. This experience might have moved Stalin to cover up the famine of 1932–1933. In addition, international humanitarian action did not fit the propaganda image of “imperialist sharks” conspiring against the Soviet state. Both times power ambitions, political priorities and mismanagement aggravated the famine. In 1922–1923 as in 1932–1933 peasants were sacrificed to the power ambitions of Bolsheviks and their industrialization drive.¹²⁸ It allows us to see a general pattern in soviet politics, not specifically Stalin’s mode of action.

Finally. Comparison of the Bolsheviks’ policy towards Russian peasants in the 1922–1923 famine with the Stalin’s policy of 1932–33 towards Ukrainian peasants weakens the concept of ethnic genocide dominant in Ukrainian historiography.

¹²⁶ Letter of N. Osinski to TsK RKPb in May 1921, *Bolshevistskoe Rukovodstvo*, 204.

¹²⁷ Velikanova, *The Myth of the Besieged Fortress*, 15.

¹²⁸ Unfortunately, it was not a novelty in Russia. Famine of 1891–92 is attributed to excessive taxation in favor of industrialization too, but at that time the grain export was temporary stopped. See Smith, Christian, *Bread and Salt*, 346; Wheatcroft, *Famines in Russia*, 9.