

Famine and Kazakh Society in the 1930s

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ABSTRACT The purpose of this paper is to determine the role of famine in the 1930s and its consequences in the Kazakh steppe. The authors indicate the cause of the hunger which were laid mostly on economic mismanagement and Soviet struggle against the rich peasants. Statistics, concerning food and livestock revealed the wrong data and provided a false favorable situation. The authors considered Stalin's policy as deliberately implemented. It did not take into account the traditional relations: the existent nomadic and semi-nomadic economy. The Kazakh Steppes produced a small quantity of grain. As a result the fast sedentarization, which managed without the necessary conditions, led to the killing and dekulakization of more skilled and effective peasants who might help their poorer relatives overcome the crisis and survive. The Kazakh society lost around 40 percent of its population. The hunger also led to migration of thousands to the neighbouring regions.

INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses one of the most complicated and most secretive periods in the history of Kazakhstan and the Soviet Union, which was deliberately blanked out from research literature and the press. Little wonder the current generation of Kazakh historians pay considerably greater attention to the study of famine at the beginning of the 20th century. This period is critical because of the tragedies that unfolded en masse and the millions of innocent souls that died unknown to the world at large.

The paper examines the reasons necessitating the existence of policies with inhuman outcomes in the context of the larger Soviet Union and the interests of the Soviet leadership. The so-called Small October, or the October revolution, played a crucial role in shifting the national system of social relations and transforming the country's economic life. The famine in Kazakhstan was also accompanied by a social transition from a feudal system to a socialist one, which bypassed Capitalism even as rapid industrialization in the cities and sedentarization in the rural areas occurred.

The researchers contend that Stalin's policies were crime against humanity as well as genocide from an academic perspective. A judicial assessment, however, reveals that Kazakhstan's famine may not have corresponded to the provisions of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (1948). The main reason for this is the lack of written docu-

mentation that proved the intentions of the Soviet Union to exterminate the Kazakh people. An examination into recent research on genocide (Naimark 2012; Chalk and Kurt 2010) and the Kazakh famine (Ohayon 2009; Pianciola 2001; Kindler 2012), the researchers understood that this phenomenon did correspond with the definition of genocide as conceived by Kurt Jonasohn and Frank Chalk (1990).

In the light of Naimark's research (2012), the famine in Kazakhstan has been deemed a part of the whole system of genocidal policy as told by the U.S.S.R. (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics). The backdrop to the creation of this concept by R. Lemkin in the 1940s - prior to its adoption by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948 — witnessed significant hesitation by the U.S.S.R to include political characters and political groups within this notion.

Also for the Kazakh researchers, the works devoted to the Ukrainian Holodomor serves as an example and a signal to study and review this dark page of the Kazakh state building history. By showing the ideological and economic conditions of the Soviet Union under Joseph Stalin, and the motivations of Stalin's leadership, Kul'chyts'kyi (2015) and other Ukrainian scholars observe "how the Holodomor was made possible, and why it took the course it did, and that it was deliberate, and different from the All-Union famine that preceded it." The analogy with Soviet famine was the famine in China (1958 - 1961) which has similar features, as in planning the economy. "This was a very difficult legacy that

the two regimes managed, as best as they could, before embarking (in 1929 and 1958) on modernisation drives that were excessively ambitious, impatient, radical, and gave rise to famine” (Bianco 2015).

Investigating the consequences of hunger, Rausa and Lloyd (2012) stated that “most human migration is in search of better opportunities reflecting the desire for an improved quality of life. In some cases, migration is the only means of survival, and yet in others, migration is forced, either by violence, political unrest, or natural disaster”.

Apart from studying the event as the outcome of government policies, this paper examines famine through an economic prism. It was sheer ignorance of the working knowledge of the economic mechanisms and theories that led to the First Plan of the Soviet Union which resulted in catastrophe in the national regions like the Kazakh Steppes. Moreover, the fight for agrarian reforms and enforced sedentarization were based on the Socialist ideology, which claimed that big collective farms and the settled nomads and semi-nomads would gradually lead to a progressive modernization of the Soviet Union. My paper argues that this kind of policy had far reaching ramifications. A demographic catastrophe killed about forty percent of the population, ruined the agrarian system and the traditional lifestyle of the time.

Objectives

The objective of the paper is to define the role of famine in the transformation of the Kazakh society in the 1930s. The main focus of study is changing of the economic style and population because after these years, neither nomadic and semi-nomadic style nor populations return to the previous conditions.

METHODOLOGY

While working on the topic, the researchers used the common methods of social studies. Structural method is based on the identification of stable relationships within the system to ensure the preservation of its basic properties. This method is important for the study of political systems and structures of power.

The other method was the observation of analytical literature relevant to the famine in Kazakhstan, the economic policy of the Soviet in

the early period. Qualitative design was the main approach in studying these issues.

OBSERVATION AND DISCUSSION

Demographic consequences of Famine: the catastrophe and victory of Stalin’s economic policy in Kazakhstan forced Sedentarization and Hunger. The Soviet government pursued several goals in the agrarian Kazakh Steppes. They wanted to (1) settle the nomad and semi-nomad peasants and (2) create collective farms with common livestock and land. The government was certain that the poor peasants would benefit from such endeavors. According to Tulepbayev B., the Soviet historian of the 1980s, “It has been proved not only theoretically, but checked in practice by millions of people, that under the dictatorship of the proletariat, it is possible to make a direct transition from a backward, little productive peasant economy to large-scale collective and highly productive economy” (Tulepbayev 1986).

But after the collapse of the U.S.S.R. and access to the hidden documents in the archives, the real policy was revealed along with its aims, methods and results. It is indisputable that the famine of 1931-1933 killed more than two million people in the Kazakh Steppes. It resulted from man-made conditions and created situations, which made life impossible for the hundreds of thousands of peasants who either died or were forced to flee into neighboring areas. Professor Gulnar Kendirbaeva at Columbia University in New York pointed out that “as a result of collectivization, accompanied by the forced settlement of the Kazakhs and Stalin’s political repressions, 1,750,000 Kazakhs (42% of the whole population) died from hunger and epidemics” (Kendirbaeva 1997). The number of dead varies, but Sergei Maksudov, a well-known demographer (from Canada), concludes that “the number of Kazakh deaths directly attributable to the famine of 1931-1933 was 1,450,000 or approximately 38 percent of the total population, the highest percentage of any nationality in the U.S.S.R.” (Maksudov 1999). Scientists did not have the exact number of deaths that resulted from the famine, but it is a fact that it was the highest percentage of loss that the nation suffered owing to Stalin’s cruel political machinery at work.

Radical disruptions of pastoral cattle and grain farming were the first outcomes of the strat-

egy, which consisted of four phases: collectivization, food tax, sedentarization and the fight against the rich peasants who were deemed “the people’s enemies”. Implementation of these politically motivated innovations in the 1930s, especially the taxes, led to the beginning of unprecedented hunger. Isabelle Ohayon, a French historian, proved this argument, showing that “taxes on crops were grown in Kazakhstan from 33 percent in 1930 to 39.5 percent in 1931. Tax on cattle continued to grow at an unprecedented pace, and the herd was reduced drastically. In 1929 it was requisitioned by 14.8 percent of the whole livestock, and in 1930 - 46.9 percent, in 1931 - 68.5 percent” (Ohayon 2009).

Archive documents show that signs of famine and disease were noticed even in the spring of 1930. There is an “excerpt from the secret summary, number 1 of the Aktyubinsk district department of the OGPU [Joint Main Political Directorate] regarding appearance of signs of famine in the villages, based on data collected by April 10th, 1930” (The secret summary number 1 of the Aktyubinsk district department of the OGPU 1930).

“To be continued in Karakilinsk District, 25 cases of famine-caused epidemic typhus with deadly outcomes have been recorded in Yartmaryk community. Several districts of Turkmenistan reported recently that poor villagers are suffering from famine. In some of the *auls* [villages] there are cases of deaths from typhus due to famine, also hydropsy [oedema] due to starvation” (Memorandum of the territorial representative of OGPU [Joint Main Political Directorate] of the U.S.S.R. in the Middle Asia regarding the extent of starvation in Turkmenistan [Turkmen SSR] 1930).

The Soviet government planned to settle 544,000 nomadic people out of the 560,000 in existence, by 1932. “Forced resettlement brought more starvation, disease and death primarily caused by inadequate shelter and food supplies, backbreaking labor and sparse technical assistance in the area of agriculture. Almost an entire generation of Kazakh intellectuals, Communist and non-communist alike were wiped out during the purges” (Jonassohn and Bjornson 1998: 255). In one of the telegrams despatched as the events unfolded, peasants from the east Kazakhstan asked for help.

“Agricultural co-operative named after Stalin from Ust-Kamenogorsk district in Semipalat-

insk *oblast* (county) fulfilled plan [of grain procurement] by 105 percent. No bread, fast, Hay Company and Bread campaign are failing. To our request for attire to give loan of 400 pounds of bread from the State Fund for 45 days the authorities refused, despite the presence of grain. Kolkhoz doomed. Please help us. June 9, 1930” (State Archive of the East Kazakhstan Oblast 1930).

But within the Soviet historical circles, all the scholars wrote about the progressive impact of Stalin’s course of actions. Tulepbayev Baidabek, following the principles of Soviet science, proved that the Communist party and the government “were able to turn the mass of the *dekhans* (peasants) to the socialist road of development”. However, he recognized that they faced “the resistance of the enemies” (Tulepbayev 1986: 115). The archived documents proved otherwise. Requisition units reached the villages and *auls* (Kazakh villages), and terrorized the people to force them into the *kolkhozy* and fulfill procurement plans. In November 1931, the officials in the district of Turgai sent activists to the *auls* with orders “to confiscate all the cattle in the *aul*”. The activists imposed sanctions against the nomads, arrested some of them and used brutal force against those who were unable to meet the required plan targets. As soon as the plan was fulfilled, the officials decided to exceed it. They forced the nomads to pay money to buy cattle in the neighboring districts. Those who could not afford to pay were imprisoned naked in the barns, which had earlier been filled with snow. Violence and brutality along with systematic use of force to achieve goals for cattle procurement were widespread in the agrarian countryside. “*In the district of Dzhembeitinsk, a nomad who was forced to deliver 50 pud (approx. 820 kg.) of meat within ten hours. This person, whose last name was Esenalın, had to slaughter two of his three cows to fulfill the request. But he was arrested as ‘malicious cattle butcher’ and his belongings were confiscated*” (Kindler 2012: 64-65).

As Robert Conquest (1986), the author of the book, “The Harvest of Sorrow: Soviet collectivization and the terror-famine” said it was a fatal mistake to confiscate the nomadic lands and seize the grain from the peasants. “*One result of the November 1929 Central Committee plenum was a decision to confiscate the nomadic lands of Kazakhstan and build a number of giant grain farms. By 1932 these were to supply 1.6 million*

tons of grain. This was an economic nonsense. The territory was not suitable for grain production" (Conquest 1986: 192).

As Martha B. Olcott (1981), an expert on Russia and Central Asia, noted, "by February 1932 approximately 87 percent of all collective farm households and 51.5 percent of all non-collectivized households in Kazakhstan were without livestock. By the end of 1932 the Kazakh economy was practically at a stand-still. General modifications in the policy of collectivization introduced in 1930 and 1931 had failed to improve the situation" (Olcott 1981).

One of the motives according to K. Jonasohn's (2012) concept of genocide was "to acquire economic wealth". The policy in the period 1931-1933 allowed confiscation of all livestock and food from the nomadic and the semi-nomadic Kazakh people leading to the creation of conditions inconvenient for the traditional ways of life resulting finally in death by starvation.

It is no secret that at the time, people suffered from "serious bodily or mental harm". There is, for example, evidence that the region even saw cases of cannibalism as cited in a special report of the Operation's Division of General Administration of the Workers' and Peasants' Militia at the OGPU "Cannibalism and murder for the purpose of cannibalism. May 31, 1933" which said, "Kazakhstan [at the time, a province of the Russian Federation] Between February 11th and 16th in the city of Aulie-Ata [the OGPU] has apprehended: 1) On the street market, a woman with cooked parts of a human corpse. According to the coroner's report, parts of a corpse of a child aged 6–7 years. 2) On the Uzbek cemetery a man of Kazakh nationality with a corpse of a child that was dismembered and cooked. Also, in the snow by the Uzbek cemetery, a murdered woman, 22, of Kazakh nationality was found dismembered (flesh of legs and arms were missing)" (Iz spetsial'noy svodki operativnogo otdela Glavnogo upravleniya Raboche-krest'yanskoy militsii pri OGPU, 'O lyudoyedstve i ubiystvakh s tsel'yu lyudoyedstva' 1933).

Desperate people troubled by their inability to feed themselves and their families lost all hope and their senses as they resorted to killing people for food. But all this did not affect Stalin.

Industrial Growth

At the end of the civil war (1917-1922) and the foreign intervention (1917-1922), which occurred after the Socialist revolution in the fall of

1917, the Soviet state started building its economy. In the period between 1926 and 1928, the Soviet leaders attempted to formulate the First Five-year Plan for the National Economy (*Pyatiletka*). Besides the argument over the practical content of the Plan, the government was restrained by several theoretical uncertainties. The Communist leaders (Bukharin, Trotsky and others) all agreed that the new economy needed neither value theory nor the theory of political economy because these were connected to Capitalism. "Under socialism the economy would do whatever the planners wanted it to do without regard for economic laws, since "economic laws" only apply to the unregulated operation of a market economy and does not restrict the freedom of planners. This view leaves little room for a scientific approach to planning" (Sherman 1969).

But the government needed to know the existing reality and conditions to plan development appropriately and use existing resources more fruitfully than before. "Eventually, the Soviet debaters came to realize that the practical questions were; which methods of development to use, how fast to develop, and in what possible directions the economy might develop" (Sherman 1969).

In 1928, the first *Pyatiletka* (1928–1932) was launched and it aimed at

(1). The country's industrialization and (2). Collectivization in rural areas. The Plan intended to increase the rates of industrial output by 16 percent, but the rate was sharply increased in comparison with the control figures. "It was 32 percent, that is, more than the highest level of the projected plan of industrialization" (2014).

The main task of the First and Second Five-year Plans was to achieve in ten years what had taken around 50-100 years for other countries to achieve and ultimately surpass them. Scientific literature today, terms this "the Great Leap Forward in the U.S.S.R." (2014).

The aim was to create an industrial sector modelled on the West to produce goods for a possible war. The economic growth demanded a huge increase in the workforce.

The rate of growth in the size of the industrial workforce was uneven. "It was much greater in the first five-year plan than in the second and the third, rising from 3.12 million in 1928 to 6.01 million in 1932, 7.92 million in 1937 and 8.29 million in 1940. In the first five-year plan much of

the increase was concentrated in two years, from late 1929 to late 1931, when the number of workers in large-scale industry grew by over two million" (Davies et al. 1994).

Therefore, it fell to the lot of the agrarian sector and the peasantry, who were in a demographic majority to feed the industrial workers. The pressure was acutely felt by the Kazakh people during the First Plan (1928-1933). Relations between the industrial workers and the peasants soured even as the former became stronger and the latter reeled under the combined forces of the state's burden and starvation. Dana Dalrymple (1964), who studied the period of the 1960s, had suggested that the key cause of the starvation was the hard procurement policy introduced by the Soviet officials in the countryside. *"Why did the government place so much emphasis on this? The answer seems to be that it wanted to secure food in order to (1) obtain foreign exchange, (2) provide for a military war chest, and (3) feed urban workers"* (Dalrymple 1964).

So, the researchers can conclude that though the Soviet government deliberately increased the speed of industrialization, the country was not ready for this cardinal transformation because it lacked adequate potential (equipments, resources, labor etc.). Ignoring economic theories and favoring a planned economy did not bode well ever since rapid industrialization proved to be a bane and threw up many difficulties.

The Role of Statistics in Decision-making of Stalin's Government

The First Five-year Plan revealed a rough falsification of statistics - actually intended to create a positive and optimistic picture of the economy - which proved to be one of the pivotal pillars on which the Soviet economy was established. These plans and their statistics served the Socialist ideology, which simply wanted to prove the Soviet-style economy as better, more productive than the Capitalist form. Earlier on, under Stalin, statistics played a key role not only in the industry, but also, the agrarian policies.

An example here, is the story of an old professional statistician P.I. Popov, who headed the TsSU (Central Statistics Office, *Tsentral'noye Statisticheskoye Upravleniye*). He was dismissed from his position in 1926, but continued to work in the Statistics Office. On November 9, 1928, he emphasized in his report that the gov-

ernment did not have the stated 900 million puds of grain (1pud=16.38 kg.) in 1927-1928. In fact the harvest figures were much less than what the government had declared. "However, when the expert's council began to check up our stock of grain, they discovered that we only had 529 puds. So, our knowledge on grain production is conditional and totally exaggerated" (1999).

This report made dire predictions of an economy under threat, leading subsequently to widespread hunger. Such information was concealed from the press and the local authorities for several years, even after the dissolution of the U.S.S.R. To redress matters, the leadership decided to increase the procurement from the wealthy peasants. At the same time, they increased the pressure on the peasants and the alleged "enemies of the nation (people)".

During this period, scientists tried to explain the errors of leadership by highlighting the difficulties and prospect of the aims. Simultaneously, they tried to shift the responsibilities from the Central government to the local authorities. In a 1965 monograph by Sergei Trapeznikov, *'Istoricheskiy opyt KPSS v osushchestvlenii Leninskogo kooperativnogo plana'* (The historical experience of the CPSU in the implementation of Lenin's co-operative plan), the author dealt very sparingly with the issue, but was forced to admit that Stalin "dizzy with success" had 'not been entirely objective'. The paper described the situation as if the collectivization had been initiated by the local authorities and executed with grave mistakes, which had been accidentally discovered by the Central government after various regions had sent across distress signals. The multi-volume "History of the Communist Party" (1971) blamed the novelty of the tasks and the acute lack of experience of the local party organizations for these errors. But new research puts the blame squarely on Stalin. The government used various tactics, methods and styles of management to demonstrate the accuracy of their ideology and the correctness of their ways but ended up with irreparable losses.

The Soviet leadership devised an ambitious plan that would not only undertake modernization through rapid industrialization, but also, bring about agrarian transformation. However, as the U.S.S.R. government did not have any financial support from other states or from any international organizations, it could only rely on its own resources — the population, a vast ma-

jority of whom (about 85%), were peasants — retarded and economically weak. The main task — the State set for itself — was the elimination of the peasantry and an increase in the numbers of industrial workers. Peasants were forced to join *kolkhoses* — which involved common ownership of land, cattle and equipment, or a migration to cities to become industrial workers. The rural inhabitants were charged with supplying food, especially grain, as grain was necessary for export to the Western markets. In exchange for agrarian goods, the Soviet state received industrial equipment and machinery from Europe.

In the Kazakh Steppes, collectivization proved more difficult compared to the other regions of the U.S.S.R, because it was accompanied by coercive settlement (sedentarization) which meant a complete transformation of the population lifestyle practiced over generations. Hence, this policy led to chaos in the local areas and destroyed the economic system of the region; ruining thus, a system which had allowed the community to survive in naturally hard conditions.

This policy was enforced by cruel and repressive methods where millions were tortured by hunger, disease, shooting and imprisonment after been branded betrayers of the Soviet regime. Documents speaking of such atrocities illustrate that the leadership knew about the difficult situation, but nonetheless, demanded the procurement of grain under the threat of replacing the responsible officials.

However, the early Soviet government did not consider the effects of their planned economy. Moreover, they ignored or were unfamiliar with the lifestyles of the nomadic and semi-nomadic peasantry. This area therefore, suffered more than the grain district as proved by renowned economist Amartya Sen.

The arguments used by Amartya Sen (1981) in his review of famine in the Sahel and Ethiopia enable us to determine the rapid spread of hunger among the pastoral people based on a comparison of similar processes that took place among the agricultural populations of these two agro-pastoral societies. Nomadic people, according to him, had to pay a higher human cost than the farmers during times of hunger. This position was confirmed by the elimination of favorable conditions for the exchange of livestock and crop production. When the harvest fell short, the nomads were forced to sell their animals in

exchange for grain, and then on, they began to experience a decrease in their abilities to facilitate growth of their flock. “Nomads were forced to sell an increasing number of cattle at lower and lower prices. The complexity of circumstances inevitably led to the disappearance of livestock and hunger” (Ohayon 2009: 208).

“Out of 47 million livestock, about 4.5 million heads of cattle remained. Collectivization, sedentary way of life, livestock confiscation, growing taxation, repressions against economically strong farmers ruined traditional structure of Kazakh village. It was an unprecedented disaster in the history of cattle breeding” (Kul-Muhammed 2012: 32-33). The Soviet government initiated industrialization, but was silenced by the cost at which it was achieved.

An examination of the latest research concerning famine in Kazakhstan in 1931-1933 in the light of the economic development reveals that this unprecedented horrible phenomenon was a deliberately planned policy formulated by Stalin and his government in accordance with the principles of Communism. An analysis of the economic aims and their implementations reveals that it was not a mismanagement of the Soviet State in the early period (the 1930s). In contrast, the government and local officials intended to destroy not just the traditional lifestyle of the Kazakhs, but also those who resisted, fought and disagreed with policy leading to the extermination of thousands of people.

The Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (1948) declared that the criteria did not fully fit with the case of Kazakhstan. Many scholars have tried to find some proof corresponding to the requirements of the United Nations’ document. But on the one hand, this was hardly due to the absence of proper documents, official instructions and others. The Soviet system, especially under Stalin, concealed a lot of documentation on the fight with so-called ‘nation (or people) enemies’ and economy-related statistics. In the post-World War II era, when the international community began to condemn human crimes and elaborated the Convention, Stalin and his government tried to exclude political groups from the definition of genocide as adopted by the United Nations. Therefore, recent assessments by scholars view the Kazakh famine as genocide masterminded by the Soviet regime.

CONCLUSION

The so-called Little October Revolution in Kazakhstan (also known as The Little Proletariat Revolution) led to the collectivization and expropriation of land and resources in the 1930s, thus implying a transition from one political and economic system (feudal) to another (Socialism), thereby bypassing Capitalism and completely destroying the Kazakh nomadic way of life. The attempt to change a society so abruptly showed tremendous ignorance of the region's economic fabric.

Admittedly, the U.S.S.R. was isolated; no international organization provided financial assistance, and many states did not even recognize the existence of the world's first Socialistic country. Hence, industrialization was carried out by the U.S.S.R. on its own, and this demanded humongous efforts that were inevitable in the context of radical economic transformations. However, the leadership initiated these changes swiftly and pressurized the local authorities to complete their dictated quotas within a short time frame thereby, offering no counterbalance that took into account the local conditions.

Collectivization, forced sedentarization and repression of the economically stronger entities, all combined to explode the traditional structures of the Kazakh villages. The famine created a million refugees who found themselves in desperate conditions as they fled to China and the Central Asian neighboring countries and further, to Turkey and Europe. While such a course could result in unprecedented demographic crises among the Kazakh population, it has been said that the concealing of all proof that maintained this was a deliberate ploy.

The inhabitants of the Kazakh Steppes weathered harsh climate and sparse vegetation, but crumbled as the famine progressed. Most of them were trapped in the huge frozen Steppes and could not move without horses. In the cities and towns near the Russian borders, they faced the hostility and chauvinism of the local Russian authorities and the ordinary people.

Stalin's policy of governance in the 1930s may have been in a bid to take the Socialist ideology to the far corners of the U.S.S.R. and beyond. However, it paved the way for cardinal transformations to be wrought in Kazakh society and their traditional, rural economy. The outcomes in terms of the great famine and the

en masse migrations of Kazakh people to neighbouring countries were of catastrophic proportions. Not surprisingly, the new scholarship studying this period today, feel that Stalin and his government heads must be held accountable for the decimation of the Kazakhs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The present research study indicated that the famine had great impact on all spheres of Kazakh society. The researchers paid attention mostly to such aspects as economic lifestyle and demographic changes. They were real catastrophe for the Kazakh people. At the same time, future research should be directed towards examination of such aspects as culture, national traditions and the education system during the first years of the Soviet Union.

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