
Soviet Famines

Introduction: Roundtable on Soviet Famines

The editors of *Contemporary European History* are delighted to present this roundtable on the Soviet famines of the 1930s, which brings into conversation leading scholars from around the world working in the field of Soviet history.

Most historians of the twentieth century have a sense of how important the debate over Ukraine's tragic famine has been to the historiographies of the Soviet Union, interwar Europe, communism, state-determined modernisation, totalitarianism and genocide. Recently there has been increased public interest in this subject, not least thanks to the appearance of Pulitzer Prize winner Anne Applebaum's widely acclaimed new book *Red Famine: Stalin's War on Ukraine*, published by Penguin/Doubleday in September 2017. The book has already reached audiences few professional historians could imagine. It has been reviewed extensively on both sides of the Atlantic by all major newspapers and politically interested magazines and has made it onto several year-end best book lists. Some of today's best-known commentators on non-fiction books have weighed in, alongside leading professional historians. The Yale historian and author of *Bloodlands* (Basic Books, 2010), Timothy Snyder, described the book as 'remarkable'. In short, the assessment of Applebaum's book within these high-profile, for public-consumption publications has been overwhelmingly positive.

It was the curious reaction by Applebaum to one of these interventions by a leading scholar writing in a mainstream newspaper that prompted the idea for this roundtable. A review of *Red Famine* by the renowned historian of Stalinist Russia, Sheila Fitzpatrick, for the British left-leaning daily the *Guardian* (25 August 2017) was the kind of review that would make people want to buy the book: thoughtful, engaged and generally positive. However, one of Fitzpatrick's comments led Applebaum to post an almost immediate censure of the reviewer on social media. The issue at hand was not seemingly personal; it was a question of interpretation. Fitzpatrick in her review had commended Applebaum, writing, 'though sympathetic to the sentiments behind it, she [Applebaum] ultimately doesn't buy the Ukrainian argument that *Holodomor* was an act of genocide'. Applebaum responded: 'that is exactly the opposite of what I wrote . . . the central argument of my book . . . is that Stalin intentionally

used the famine not only to kill Ukrainians but to destroy the Ukrainian national movement’.

The renewed interest in the Soviet famines as evidenced by the enthusiasm for Applebaum’s book, and the perplexing misunderstanding between how her book could be read and how she intended it to be read, convinced the editors of *Contemporary European History* to use this opportunity to open up the conversation to leading experts in the field. The goal was not to feed a polemic but instead to reassess how the historiography of the Soviet famines has changed over the last twenty years. We also felt that the subject provided scope for a broader discussion about the type of history we write, the sources we use and the stories that the reading public want to consume. Finally, we are pleased that a roundtable on this topic complements our new ‘Spotlight’ series, which examines the state of historiography in different European countries, the opening one of which was, by coincidence, on Ukraine.

We contacted leading specialists globally and were delighted by the response. The following (in alphabetical order) agreed to participate: Sarah Cameron (University of Maryland-College Park), Alexander Etkind (European University Institute, Fiesole), Arch Getty (UCLA), Andrea Graziosi (University of Naples Federico II), Norman Naimark (Stanford University), Tanja Pentler (University of Heidelberg), Niccolò Pianciola (Lingnan University, Hong Kong), Ronald Suny (University of Michigan–Ann Arbor) and Stephen Wheatcroft (Deakin University, Melbourne). We decided together with the participants that there would be two stages of submission, a preliminary one that would then be distributed to all the contributors, and then a secondary submission. A series of guiding questions were agreed upon, which participants could address as they saw fit. These questions included:

1. How have new sources (many of which have come to light in the last decade) and new methodologies of approaching these sources (by demographers, economists, etc.) altered or confirmed our understanding of the Soviet collectivisation famines?
2. What role did popular participation in the Soviet system play in creating these famines and how can we categorise the actions of mid- or low-level party bureaucrats working for the Soviet state?
3. How does the popular narrative of the *Holodomor* change if you broaden the narrative to include simultaneous mass famines elsewhere in the Soviet Union, including in the Volga region and Kazakhstan?
4. What are the stakes in classifying this as a genocide rather than by other terms such as ‘mass murder’ or ‘mass death’? And have these stakes changed over the last ten years or so?

As readers will immediately note, there is no specific reference in the questions to Applebaum’s book or the Applebaum–Fitzpatrick exchange. Most contributors, however, anchored their responses in light of these events. Authors were encouraged to write short (c. 2,000 words) pieces for a non-specialist audience, in a style that would be accessible to those interested in the issues but unfamiliar with many of the details. All the authors have submitted passionate, highly diverse takes on the

Soviet famines, ranging the gamut of methodologies, source bases and geographical concerns. We have learned much from reading these submissions and hope our readers feel the same.

The Contemporary European History Editorial Team