



The Harvest of Sorrow: Soviet Collectivization and the Terror-Famine

Robert Conquest

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Ambitious, meticulously researched, and lucidly written, *The Harvest of Sorrow* is a deeply moving testament to those who died, and will register in the Western consciousness a sense of the dark side of this century's history.

The Harvest of Sorrow: Soviet Collectivization and the Terror-Famine Details

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Trevor says

****The Harvest of Sorrow**** is the first full history of one of the most horrendous human tragedies of the 20th century. Between 1929 and 1932 the Soviet Communist Party struck a double blow at the Russian peasantry: dekulakization, the dispossession and deportation of millions of peasant families, and collectivization, the abolition of private ownership of land and the concentration of the remaining peasants in party-controlled "collective" farms. This was followed in 1932-33 by a "terror-famine," inflicted by the State on the collectivized peasants of the Ukraine and certain other areas by setting impossibly high grain quotas, removing every other source of food, and preventing help from outside--even from other areas of the Soviet Union--from reaching the starving populace. The death toll resulting from the actions described in this book was an estimated 14.5 million--more than the total number of deaths for all countries in World War I. Ambitious, meticulously researched, and lucidly written, ****The Harvest of Sorrow**** is a deeply moving testament to those who died, and will register in the Western consciousness a sense of the dark side of this century's history.

Mark says

Conquest clearly explains the precursors to famine, the tragedy itself, and its aftermath. Many first-hand accounts are quoted, often at length, from both victims and government "activists," allowing for an intimate understanding of specific people's experiences in context. Conquest also writes of the West's knowledge of and reaction to the famine, including a description of Stalin's tactics of obfuscation. Statistics are offered frequently. *Harvest of Sorrow* reads as a relatively objective account of the relevant event and its context. It is accessible to readers with limited background knowledge of Soviet history, though many names of officials, which go unmentioned in the book, will be unfamiliar.

Mikey B. says

Page 299 (my book) Khrushchev quote
"No one was keeping count"

This is about one of the more appalling episodes in the history of the Soviet Union under Stalin. The centerpiece is the treatment of the ethnic and farming communities in Ukraine during 1929 to 1934.

By following the dogma of Marxism-Leninism class war was declared on the so-called rich farmers of Ukraine labeled as kulaks. The definition of kulak varied – it could be a peasant farmer who owned a horse or two, a pig or two, who employed a labourer from time to time... Under Marxism private property and enterprise was to be abolished. So the kulaks needed to be eliminated; they were enemies of the people.

Page 115 Stalin quote

"We have gone over from a policy of limiting the exploiting tendencies of the kulak to a policy of liquidating the kulak as a class"

Some were removed from their farms and sent to a remote Gulag to fend for themselves; others shot outright. More enemies had to be made when agricultural production sagged – so a class of sub-kulaks was found.

This all led to a loss of the most productive and industrious farmers and farmland – and the grain output kept decreasing to the stage where it was less than in the time of the Czars. The remaining peasants were forced onto collectives where a major portion of the grain output was requisitioned by the state. With the best farmers gone, with the produce seized by the government, with incompetent authorities in charge of the collectives – starvation set in. Stalin also saw the Ukrainian nationality as a threat to the centralization of power in the Soviet Union. The vast Ukrainian peasantry and its cultural elite had to be eradicated. The famine was deliberate. The author estimates that over 5 million Ukrainians died in the famine and millions more disappeared in the Gulag for dekulakization. The author also emphasizes how this collectivization negatively impacted other areas of the Soviet Union.

This is a difficult book to read. There are a lot of statistics that the author uses to back up his statements. But it is the personal presentations that are most disturbing; the chapter on “children” being one of the most affecting. This has been used as a source book for other volumes I have read on the Soviet Union, which is how I came to know of it. I never quite realized until reading this book just how severe and methodical this genocide was. This is what happens when ideology supersedes.

Page 233 a Soviet activist

With the rest of my generation I firmly believed that the ends justified the means. Our great goal was the universal triumph of communism, and for the sake of that goal everything was permissible – to lie, to steal, to destroy hundreds of thousands and even millions of people, all those who were hindering our work or could hinder it, everyone who stood in the way. And to hesitate or doubt about all this was to give in to “intellectual squeamishness” and “stupid liberalism”...

I took part in this myself, scouring the countryside, searching for hidden grain, testing the earth with an iron rod for loose spots that might lead to buried grain. With the others, I emptied out the old folks’ storage chests, stopping my ears to children’s crying and the women’s wails. For I was convinced that I was accomplishing the great and necessary transformation of the countryside... that those who sent me – and I myself – knew better than the peasants how they should live...

In the terrible spring of 1933 I saw people dying from hunger. I saw women and children...And corpses...I saw all this and did not go out of my mind or commit suicide. Nor did I curse those who had sent me out to take away the peasants’ grain in the winter, and in the spring to persuade the barely walking...to go into the fields in order to “fulfil the Bolshevik sowing plan”.

Monty says

Hitler was a piker compared with Joseph Stalin. Stalin created the gulags in the 1920's, and created a man-made famine to eliminate most of the population of the Ukraine who refused to get aboard his economic plan. This work is one of the pieces of evidence proving that more people on this earth were murdered in the name of State Communism than from any other single ideology. Mao, Pol Pot, and all of the other State sponsored secular tyrants learned their trade from Stalin. Stalin alone probably murdered at least 15 million of his own people. Stalin starved men, women and children--deported them, and imprisoned them without the least

concern for the outcome. This campaign was completely hidden from the West by a state-orchestrated information and propaganda campaign which allowed intellectuals in the West to see only the "bright and positive" side of Soviet society while hiding the horrors of what was really happening.

American and British journalists were taken on a happy ride by "Uncle Joe" and gullibly believed the picture he presented of the "advanced civilization" of the Soviet Union. They were never allowed to see the nightmare occurring in the Ukrainian and Siberian areas. In Russia there is plenty of room for hiding what is not meant to be discovered.

Hitler learned from Stalin how to make gulags and stuff railway cars with innocent victims. This book was the first published to describe this terrible event that can no longer be concealed.

Carolyn says

It is a curious thing, but the public schools do not teach anything about this subject in their history classes. This book should be required reading!

It is not an easy read any way you look at it, but it is an important book. Please pick it up and give it a read.

DoctorM says

A classic--- and a vital part of anyone's library on 20th-c. Russia. A horrifying account of what Stalin--- and the Party apparatus; never never never think it was all Stalin alone ---did to the Russian peasantry as part of forced industrialisation: crushing the peasantry in order to extract the surplus that would feed the cities and the workers needed for the manic industrial growth projected under the 5-Year Plans, exporting grain to pay for building up Soviet industry even while the countryside starved, shattering by main force and terror any chance the peasantry might have had to defend itself. The Russian peasantry had been squeezed before under the tsars to pay for railroads and industry, but *Conquest* highlights the idea of deliberate terror designed not just to feed the cities at the expense of the Russian countryside, but to wage a kind of one-sided civil war that would destroy any hint of separatism in the Ukraine or any hope of the peasantry establishing its own political rights. Stalin's plans, unlike those of, say Count Witte in the 1890s, required mobilizing the Party to wage war on the peasantry--- required creating a kind of hysteria around collectivisation and industrialisation that would give the Party control down to the smallest village. "Harvest of Sorrow" is a powerful book, and it deserves to be on the shelves of anyone who cares about Russia or about the nightmare of the last century.

Manray9 says

The best description of Stalin's forced collectivization of agriculture -- arguably the most monstrous crime of a monstrous century.

John says

A most engaging and horrifying book. It conveys the circumstances and the means by which the Soviet government put to death at least 10 million peasants. Most of these people, the adults at least, opposed

collectivation to some degree. Many others were members of national minorities, such as the Ukrainians, who may not have opposed 'Soviet power,' i.e. collectivation, at all, but who were members of national minorities, Ukrainians, for example, devoted to their national language, culture, traditions, etc., and who resisted assimilation into a homogeneous Soviet identity, behavior and culture.

I read this book shortly after reading Montefiore's *Stalin: The Court of the Red Tzar*, a very illuminating sequence. Montefiore's book describes the everyday life of Stalin's ruling elite who carried out the genocidal policies toward the rural population the effects of which Conquest describes in his book. And they all knew that millions, as many as ten million, were dying, but continued to pursue their realization of 'historical necessity' nonetheless with a clear conscience and a full stomach.

Nicole Timko says

I'm a person of Ukrainian descent on both parents' sides of the family. I first learned about this horrific event in 2nd year university when I took a course on Poland and Ukraine. As much as people blame Stalin and he is to blame for most things, but this didn't just happen in Ukraine (and be careful not to say the Ukraine. It isn't a province, it's a country) but it happened in Russia itself. There wasn't just dekulakization in Ukraine. It happened in the farm lands in Russia as well. Conquest has since retracted his opinions in this book and said it was purely based on economics of the day. I do think that Stalin was attacking Ukrainian nationalism, but he was also attacking Russian peasants nationalism as well. Stalin only cared about feeding the people in Moscow. The memorial of this tragic event is known as the Holodomor and is recognized by 13 states as an act of genocide.

Darya says

This book was banned in Canada when it first came out. (I had to have it). It is such a gut-wrenching account of how people were forced into collectives, forced to endure famine and hardships that were hidden from the western world. The world knew one history of that time period but the reality, hidden by the Soviets, was another entirely. It isn't a book for the faint of heart and the pictures boggle the mind. With the help of Stalin approximately 14 million people died in and around the Ukraine.

David M says

Earlier this year I read Timothy Snyder's great book *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin*, which gives a truly horrifying account of the Ukrainian famine. Snyder, however, gives a much lower figure than 14.5 million, something closer to 4 million. Why this huge discrepancy?

This maybe points to a larger question. Famines have been common throughout most of human history. By the end of the first world most the inhabitants of the Russian empire were starving or severely malnourished. Nicholas II didn't deliberately set out to starve his people, but to a large extent these food shortages were the predictable consequence of the imperial system and the policies Nicholas pursued. Still, it seems that most historians don't hold him personally responsible in the way they do Stalin for the famines in the early thirties. What's the difference? ... (that's not a purely rhetorical question; I do think there is a difference, but I can't fully articulate it yet, which is one reason I want to keep reading books on the subject)

Marks54 says

This is a history of the famine in the Ukraine brought about by Stalin's collectivization program and enforced by terror. It is a horrible story and that is both depressing and still little known today. Conquest is a superb writer and the book is captivating to read even as it is difficult. There are other treatments of this series of events, such as *Bloodlands*, that place it in context with other atrocities of the time. There is even an emerging genre of these events, such as histories of the Irish potato famine or the WWII famine in Bengal. This is one of the first that I read and it is still one of the best.

Czarny Pies says

The importance of this book is that it finally silenced those who denied that there had been a man-made famine in the Ukraine between 1929 and 1932. Within 5 years of its publication in 1986, the overwhelming major of academic historians in the West were willing to acknowledge that there had indeed been a Ukrainian "Holocaust". From the 1930s to the early 1980s communist intellectuals and fellow travellers in the West had essentially succeeded in convincing the public that the stories of the famine were lurid lies peddled by angry, Slavic expatriates. In fact when I attended the University of Toronto in the 1980s many professors were still vigorously asserting that several years of poor weather had been blown up into a non-existent genocide.

Conquest convinced the Anglo-Saxon academic community of the reality of the state-created famine because he used the language and tools of Anglo-Saxon academics in his book. More importantly he was a professor on staff at a major American university (Stanford) which gave his book a credibility that a comparable work by an expatriate could never have achieved.

The left has had some success countering the claims of this book. While Conquest suggested a death toll of six million, his critics now assert that 3 million was probably closer to the mark. I think the debate his open. Nobody was keeping track of the numbers properly. What historians have to quantify the number of deaths are census figures for 1926 and 1937. What one finds that with the rate of natural population increase being sustained in the 1920s, there was a shortfall in the Ukrainian population of 15 million when the projected the numbers were compared to the actual. Conquests believes that 6 of the 15 million died in famine of 1929-1932 with the balance perishing in the Gulags which were created to re-educate Kulaks and bourgeois elements. The current state of the statistical debate is that 3 million is a safe estimate on the low end range of the likely number of deaths that can be attributed to the 1929-1932 famine.

Fortunately for the reader, Conquest spends only one chapter on the statistics of the affair. One major part of the book examines the process of how and why the aggressive crop seizures took place in the Ukraine and Kazakhstan took place. Here Conquest takes advantage of fairly conventional archival material to create the narrative of the famine. Finally another substantial section of the book is devoted to testimonials of those who witnessed the events in the Ukraine.

The *Harvest of Death* is an extremely important book that deserves the widest possible audience. It describes a phenomenon that was repeated in China during the Great Leap Forward where estimates put the death toll between 15 and 45 million and in Pol Pot's Cambodia where 3 to 6 million died of hunger in the 1970s.

Thomas Armstrong says

I was reading Conquest's book on The Great Terror, about Stalin's show trials in the late thirties, but then thought I should go back a few years and learn about Stalin's terror famines. I'd also read Hungry Ghosts about China's terror famine in the mid-fifties and wanted to see how it played out in Russia. Like Hungry Ghosts, this was an incredibly eye-opening and shocking book. We were never taught about any of this in school. The stupidity and sheer evil of Stalin is really highlighted here in meticulous detail through statistics, anecdotes, citations, and a good narrative (I confess, I skipped over some of the more densely statistical pages, not being a real number freak). For anyone who is following the current crisis in the Ukraine, this should absolutely be on their reading list (I was going to say bedside table, but this book should perhaps be read during the day so you don't get nightmares!). It left me feeling that our government is not doing enough to stop the spread of Russian imperialism in the Ukraine. Putin seems to want to resuscitate some of Stalin's methods (be aggressive, then pull back, more aggression, then denials, etc. etc.), and if we don't act decisively (I don't mean start a war) then the Ukraine is bound to be swallowed up in due time. Some people may say: "well, it's really a part of Russia, anyway," but IT ISN'T. It's its own vibrant culture with a strong sense of nationalism that has been tested over and over again throughout history. Anyway, back to the book: it was heartbreaking to see the people in the Ukraine, Kazakhstan, and other regions of the former USSR get murdered, exiled, imprisoned, and starved, just so that Stalin could subdue their "colonies" sense of nationalism, and force peasants out of their centuries-old agricultural practices (which worked) into forced collectivization (which didn't work). Also, Conquest spends a lot of time at the beginning of the book detailing the "dekulakization" of the countryside (a kulak being a prosperous peasant), where anyone could be called a "kulak" and have all his possessions taken away, forced into exile, or shot, as part of the "class struggle." I've read Darkness at Noon, Animal Farm, and other fictional treatments of the Soviet Terror, but this book really hits you on the head with how "theory" (in this case Marxism) can be valued more highly than simple human values and virtues. How many hundreds of millions of people in the history of the world have been killed because of "theory" (including religious "theory")? And at the end of the book, Conquest writes about how so many in the West were duped, including one guy who won a Pulitzer Prize for reporting that there was no famine! Malcolm Muggeridge, who I used to watch on the Jack Paar Show (and maybe Carson), was one of the few journalists to report the truth in the West, and he was castigated for his "distortions" especially by the Left in the West. Now, I'm on the left politically, but this sort of thing shows me some of the glaring flaws of leftist politics (e.g. being blind to gross violations of human justice in the name of some left-wing ideal). For those attracted to any policy of any sort, this book rang screamed out to me: Caveat emptor!

Mike says

I feel a bit bad marking this low, as at the time when it was written it was probably quite brave and necessary, but while Conquest (awesome author name, by the way) lays out an unapologetic indictment of the Soviet government for its intentional infliction of famine on the Ukraine, and its damnable stubbornness in insisting on ideologically-motivated reforms even in the teeth of overwhelming evidence that they were failures, the writing is weak, the organization is scattered (alternating chronological chapters with thematic ones with no rhyme or reason), and he relies so much on endless statistics and atomistic anecdotes that none of the important people, save Stalin, come across with any sort of personality. An important story, but poorly told, at least to the lay reader.

