

## **Famine and Socialism**

Roland Boer, 2020

One of the great myths concerning socialist collectivisation of agriculture is that it produced 'man-made' famines. This story is perpetrated by friend and foe alike.

**Example 1:** The famine of 1932-33 in the Soviet Union, which is supposed to have been 'man-made'.

During the 'socialist offensive' of the late 1920s and 1930s in the Soviet Union, a massive process of industrialisation and collectivisation took place.

The Soviet Union did not have access to and did not want to use capitalist modes of accumulating funds, namely, colonial expansion (dispossession of others) and international loans. So the industrialisation process had to rely on internal, or socialist accumulation. In order to generate such accumulation, the government set higher prices for the increasing abundance of manufactured goods, as a type of super-tax that would flow back into industry. Meanwhile, prices on agricultural goods were set lower, albeit with fluctuations depending on seasonal shortages and in light of the constant efforts at speculation. This tensions of this 'scissors' method of generating revenue for further industrialisation generated obvious problems, but these were exacerbated by a famine in 1927-28, requiring enforced requisitions of grain in response to some peasants withholding agricultural produce for speculation (Withholding of grain for the sake of raising prices was an old practice, appearing not only during the NEP of the mid-1920s, but also much earlier). Obviously, something had to be done, since the 'scissors' method could not continue – it was always conceived as a temporary measure.

Another persistent problem was that traditional Russian farming methods were inadequate in light of new developments and a rising population. I mean not the subsistence survival agriculture practised in many parts of the world for millennia, but the practice of landlords extracting food necessary for survival by farmers. In fact, rural famines were endemic to Russian life. In more recent memory, famine hit in 1890-91, the revolutions of 1905 and 1917 had taken place in the context of widespread famine, which added to socio-economic chaos. Famines also blighted 1918-20 and were exacerbated during 1920-21.

So the process of collectivisation was at one level an effort to deal with endemic famine.

Many of course will point to the famine of 1932-33, with some even suggesting it was a deliberate policy of 'genocide' focused on the Ukraine (the 'Holodomur'). But the famine also affected Northern Caucasus, Volga Region and Kazakhstan, the South Urals, and West Siberia. Enough

research has been done to show that the famine was the result of significant weather conditions (drought), low harvest, international blockade, and the profound turmoil and frequent violence of the 1930s.

Were there famines later? Yes. One could argue that the food shortage during the siege of Leningrad was a famine, but the reasons are obvious here. And after the devastation of war and the effort to defeat Hitler, a famine took place after a drought in 1947. Most importantly, despite the drought cycle, no further famines were experienced.

Obviously, collectivisation had a distinct result in dealing with the endemic problem of famines. Why? Collectivisation enabled mechanisation and increase in the amount of land under cultivation, so much so that in 1932 many farmers worked harder to ensure greater crop yield and overcome the famine by the next year.

**Example 2:** The Chinese famine of 1959-61, during the 'Great Leap Forward', is also described as 'man-made', a result of the 'foolhardy' effort at collectivisation.

Once again, famine was endemic to Chinese agriculture (see Losurdo's *War and Revolution*, pp. 271-72). Restricting ourselves to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, famines occurred in 1810-11, 1846, 1849, 1876-79 (9-13 million died), 1896-97, 1907, 1911, 1920-21 (again in northern China), 1928-30 (3 million people died), 1936 (5 million), 1940-41 (2-3 million). In famine was a persistent problem.

If we add the semi-colonisation of China, invasions, insurrections, along with droughts, the deaths in China between 1850 and 1950 were by far the highest in the world.

Again, something obviously had to be done. Having seen the long-term success of the collectivisation in the Soviet Union in overcoming the persistent cycle of famine, collectivisation was also undertaken in China.

The problem now was not only the devastation of decades of civil war and Japanese occupation, but a deliberate policy of economic warfare and strangulation by the Truman regime. This included schematic bombing from Taiwan of any industrial facilities built on the eastern seaboard. The deliberate aim was to keep the new communist country below subsistence level so as to produce a catastrophic economic situation, if not disaster and collapse.

We need to add Mao's impatience. Seeing the dire situation of the country in light of economic devastation and US policy, he sought to leap over stages of development in order to escape from the desperate trap. Again, the US regimes made the most of situation, seeking to exacerbate the situation and cause widespread devastation. By the early 1960s, the Kennedy regime,

looking back on the famine of 1959-61, gloated that they succeeded in retarding Chinese economic development by decades.

Were there famines after this time in China? Again, no. The long history of endemic famine and the tragic lesson of 1959-61 meant that China has managed to put famine behind it.