

The Russian Famine of 1891-92

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. . . those people's efforts are in vain who with unchanged lives desire to come to the people's aid by distributing the wealth they have first taken from them.

-- Leo Tolstoy <1>

Famine is one of the worst, if not the worst of the disasters that afflict humankind. The people affected are reduced to chronic poverty and are in absolute want. Probably the worst thing about a famine is that it is not only caused by natural phenomena, but it is also due to man-made causes that could have been avoided. A famine is not just simply caused by a crop failure whose immediate cause is meteorological, usually drought, but is also produced by a complex of social and economic forces that reflect general rural poverty. The Russian famine of 1891-92 affected an area of around 900,000 square miles in the Volga and central agricultural areas. Ironically, these were once the most fertile and productive parts of Russia. This area included the provinces of Nizhni-Novgorod, Riazan, Tula, Kazan, Simbirsk, Saratov, Penza, Samara and Tambov. It affected between fourteen to twenty million people, of which 375,000 to 400,000 died, mostly of disease. Due to malnutrition caused by the famine, people were more susceptible to infection. One of the largest relief campaigns in Russian history was undertaken by the government to help alleviate the disaster in which eleven million people received supplemental rations from the state. Count Leo Tolstoi was the main critic of the government. He blamed it for its policies regarding the famine itself while also criticizing the relief efforts implemented by the state. There were also major relief efforts from the West, particularly the United States, which sent grain and money to the beleaguered area. Western correspondents reported regularly on the situation to the rest of the world. The Russian famine illustrated without a doubt the internal weakness and utter backwardness of the Russian Empire. It also demonstrated the poor standard of living and the medieval conditions that the majority of the population endured. The famine proved that the tsarist government was inept and inefficient in a way that made it incapable of foreseeing the disaster. Furthermore it mishandled the relief effort in spite of the tremendous effort that was undertaken.

Throughout its long history, Russia has been plagued by famine. The Nikonian chronicle, written between 1127 and 1303, recorded no less than eleven famine years during that period. In 1873 when he was visiting his estate in Samara, Leo Tolstoi became aware of the seriousness of a famine there. Alexander I in 1822 was the first to attempt to create a comprehensive famine relief system. Modified by Nicholas I in 1834, it had changed little since then. It provided for a network of granaries that theoretically would have been filled by the peasants in good years and relied upon during a crop failure. While this theory looked good on paper, in practice it was a complete failure. Even in the best years

the peasants were too poor to contribute, and where the granaries actually existed they were usually empty. <2>

Causes

The famine in 1891-92 was initially caused by the bad weather in 1890 and 1891. The dry autumn delayed the seeding of the fields, and the winter, which began early, was more severe than usual, with only light snowfall. Heavy snow usually protects the seedlings from the cold. Melting snow and ice caused the spring floods of the Volga that spread over the plains whose grass is used as fodder. This year the small amount of snow caused the ground to freeze. This killed the young plants because the late planting did not give them enough time to take root. The poor weather eliminated the main source of feed for the animals. They were crucial to the peasants because they provided the power needed to plow the fields. The cold weather lasted until mid-April, followed by a summer in 1892 that was extremely hot and dry. Five rainless months contributed to the smallest total grain harvest for European Russia in a decade.

Despite the poor harvest of 1891, there was enough food available to feed the population, but this would only have been possible if the harvest was rightly distributed. <3> This was almost impossible because the limited means of communication could not establish equilibrium between certain areas. In some areas there was a surplus and in others there was a deficit. Most of this grain, however, was exported. This was due to government economic policies that encouraged the sale of Russian grain abroad to strengthen the national economy. Even though the crops were diminishing yearly, exports remained the same; the grain reserves were thereby reduced. Due to a worldwide agricultural crisis, the price of grain was declining. Peasants received less and less for their crops so they sought to increase the size of their crops at the expense of fallow, pasture, and forest land. This led to the reduction of the herds which were the only source of power and fertilizer, the chopping down of forests, which were the natural wind breaks, and the rapid exhaustion of the soil. Before examining the situation of the peasantry at the time immediately leading up to the famine, one must first look back thirty years to investigate the origins of rural poverty.

When the Emancipation Manifesto was proclaimed on 19 February 1861, the peasants initially regarded it as a great blessing granted to them by their beloved little father, Tsar Alexander II. This blessing, however, eventually became a curse on the peasantry because of the harsh provisions that were thrust upon their shoulders. The allotments they were given were woefully inadequate to supply even their limited needs. It was estimated that ten to fourteen hectares were needed to maintain a peasant family, but most only received two to three *hectares*. <4> The peasantry also had to pay for the land at a high cost--the supposed loss to the landlord by emancipation rather than the market value of the land. Most also had to hand over the land to collective farms, the mfr. It was responsible for the payment of redemption money for the land as well as the taxes, and was responsible directly to the government. Thus, the foundation of Russian agriculture was viewed as radically weak and ultimately responsible for the famine.

One of the major problems caused by collective ownership was that the peasant had no incentive to cultivate the land intelligently because it was eventually passed on to other members of the *mir*. He worked it for what it ". . . will immediately yield for him, caring little for its future condition, for he does not know how soon the *mir* may allot it to another." <5> Another problem was that as the peasant families grew, the commune land was further subdivided. The apportionment was barely enough to maintain the peasant in even the most primitive manner. Before emancipation, most peasants could rely upon their owners for help since they were the source of their wealth. At emancipation, most landlords, however, left their estates, since they lacked skill in cultivation of the land and depended on their serfs. They only visited for a few weeks out of the year and as to the condition of the peasants, the landlords were legally released from all responsibility. <6>

And other factors made the situation worse. The development of railroads that raised the value of land and produce encouraged some landlords to devastate the forests, impoverish the soil, and raise the already high rents on their peasants. Burdened with heavy debt and taxes, peasants were left with only two viable options--to rent land from the village usurer, the kulak, or to leave the *mir* and go to the cities in search of factory work. <7>

The peasants were also burdened by their own backward methods of farming which dated back to the Dark Ages. They used primitive methods and medieval implements, such as wooden ploughs that were incapable of plowing deep enough. They were also ignorant of new fertilizers such as phosphates. They usually used manure as a fertilizer, but not in the Volga region. There it was used instead as a fuel because the area was bare of forests and the winters were severe. The reduction in the number of animals, the source of their fertilizer, further exhausted the fertility of the soil. The peasants also lacked any adequate agricultural knowledge and had neither the material means nor desire to improve the condition of the land. They had no inducement to raise the productiveness of the soil because anything produced above the subsistence level would have been surrendered in the form of dues and taxes.

Government efforts to educate the peasantry on the best modes of cultivating the land were insufficient. The only school of agriculture in the entire Empire was the Petrovsky Academy in Moscow. Even these graduates were not permitted to make any practical application of their knowledge. The government also conscripted the strongest and ablest of the young peasant men into the military as soon as they were old enough. They were thereby taking the best workers away from the land where they were most desperately needed. Many critics argued that one million men in the army at peacetime was not justified and if those men had been in the fields the famine may not have happened. <8> Critics also state that the money saved from this could have been used to construct lines of communication and make agricultural improvements. To the Russian peasant the harvest meant everything because he was unable to save; he depended on the harvest to carry him from one year to the next. The crop was not merely just food for the peasants; it also provided their clothing, fuel, taxes, and fodder for the animals. If the crop failed, everything failed. A crop failure spelled certain doom for the peasant because not only did they have little or no food to eat, but also no material to make clothes from home spun flax. They also had no material to make fires to keep warm during the long, cold

winter or any means to pay taxes or rent. Constantly living on the edge of starvation even during the best harvest years, the famine showed just how bad a life the peasantry endured.

In the fields it was known as early as June 1891 that the crops would be a complete failure, and with supplies exhausted, a famine appeared to be inevitable. Despite the early warning of the impending disaster, the *chinovniks*, agriculturists who occupied salaried positions and were far removed from the actual tillers of the soil, were oblivious of the situation and continued to send favorable reports to St. Petersburg. <9> Therefore the government proceeded to collect taxes that the peasants in the afflicted regions could not pay because they had no income from grain. To compensate, the tax collectors seized the peasants' horses, cows and pigs. Physically able men, although usually suffering from dysentery or scurvy, often left their villages to wander the countryside, begging for food and employment. The movement of these large masses of starving peasants was the main reason for the rapid spread and frequent outbreaks of diseases such as scarlet fever, typhus, diphtheria, cholera and smallpox throughout the region. The rest of the village population, the old, young, and females, were usually required to stay at home. <10> The staple of the peasant diet during the famine was "hunger bread" that was made from weeds, chopped straw, cockle, tree bark, and sometimes, sand. It was described as ". . . a lump of hard black earth covered with a coating of mold" <11> and as ". . . so disgusting in smell, taste and appearance that it is difficult to imagine that mankind could be reduced to such an extremity as to be forced to eat it." <12> It was often blamed for prevalence of typhus. The winter was especially harsh. The peasants had to resort to using their straw roofs for fires, thus leaving them unprotected from the elements. Suicide and, surprisingly, alcoholism were prevalent amongst the peasantry during this time. Some peasants were reported to have spent their donated money or sold gifts of food for vodka or other strong drink

Relief Efforts

By the fall of 1891 it had become obvious that a major calamity could be prevented only by the shipment of enormous quantities of grain into the stricken provinces. <13> The government was ignorant of the famine until tax collectors reported that the peasants of the region had nothing with which to pay them. Petersburg thought that the collectors were to blame and the Emperor sent men into the interior to investigate. The grain buyers, however, knew of the situation. They quickly bought and exported reserve grain before an Imperial *ukase* forbidding the export of wheat, oats and rye was issued. A special Relief Committee was organized by Alexander III, who named the Caesarovich, the future Nicholas II, as president. The Emperor himself gave half of his income, around five million rubles, to relief funds while the Empress, through the special relief committee, collected twelve million rubles, mostly from foreign donations. The Empress' sister, Grand Duchess Elizabeth, organized her own relief committee that held bazaars in Moscow to sell peasant-made items. The central treasury, with its slow, cumbersome procedures was the main source of famine relief. For this reason, aid reached the afflicted areas tardily Relief was also slowed even more because there was no system of distributing assistance; everything was done on a trial and error basis. The government

distributed special financial aid of 150 million rubles to the *zemstvos* to finance food and seed purchases. They bought food, then loaned it to those who could be expected to repay. In such a system, only some workers and landowners were eligible, and the rest of the rural population, consisting of the elderly, children, and widows, were excluded. <14>

Flour was distributed monthly to children over the age of two, and to women and men who were unable to work. It only lasted between fifteen to twenty days, and due to the lack of fuel it usually had to be eaten raw. Many of those who did not belong to a commune were denied aid because the government hoped that they would find work. The government did not realize that work was extremely scarce and even if they found employment the wages were low while food prices were very high. At most the *zemstvos* could only provide one and a fourth pounds of rye per day to able bodied men or women. Those receiving this aid were chosen by a *Zemski Nachalnik* who was appointed by the government to preside over a specified district or county. <15> The power of the official to choose who received food and who did not, thus practically deciding who lived and who died, was very often abused. Only one-third of the seed that was needed was distributed and more often than not eaten by the sowers. They received it too late or not at all because they were too weak to walk to the place of distribution. Even if they had enough seed most of the peasants would be unable to plow because millions of horses either died or were sold, leaving enormous areas unsown. In February 1892 the government addressed the shortage of stock problem by arranging for the purchase of 30,000 horses from the Kirghiz steppes.

The effects of the famine were not limited to just the immediate area afflicted, but the entire economic equilibrium of the country was upset. It hurt those in the cities because ". . . masses of the people in industrial regions earn[ed] barely enough to buy their additional supply of bread at ordinary prices. [When prices rose] to about double the average they suffer[ed] severely." <16> The fear of revolution was heavy in the air of the capitals. Many thought a peasant insurrection would spark dormant dissatisfaction in the cities and lead to a great rebellion.

The government also attempted to limit the social and economic consequences of the disaster by instituting a system of public works. This had been a technique of famine relief since the time of Catherine II. In theory this would provide the destitute with employment, while also accomplishing something meaningful in return. This undertaking ultimately proved to be a major fiasco, due to poor organization and mismanagement by General Annenkov, the director of the project. Ten million rubles were allocated to finance the repair and construction of roads and forestry, thus providing immediate employment relief. The major problem was that the works were not put into effect until the summer and fall of 1892 when the crisis had already passed. They were also established far from peasant villages and the conditions of work were extremely harsh. The public works system was scrapped because the projects undertaken were poorly planned and managed. The projects brought a four million ruble deficit to the budget without adequately providing employment to the peasants or paying them properly. <17>

The poor transportation and communication networks of the region proved to be a large obstacle in carrying out the relief effort. The implementation of the relief effort was slow due to the fact that government information-gathering agencies were unable to develop an accurate picture of the needs of the afflicted areas quickly enough. The actual implementation was difficult because of the insufficiency of the rail system of Russia, which proved inadequate to handle this large scale emergency. The region east of the Volga only had one rail line while other afflicted areas had none. Count Vorontsov-Dashkov was named vice president of the Relief Committee and given power over all Russian railways to transport, free of charge, grain or other supplies for the peasants. <18> The *zemstvos*, encouraged by special freight rates, purchased grain from distant markets to avoid high prices locally. This strained the capacity of the railways and caused delays. The railroad crisis was further complicated by the habit of clients of the lines demanding ten times more trucks than they needed in order to insure that they received any. The waterways of the area proved inadequate to handle the enormous shipments of the relief effort as well. It was difficult to move barges into the area by the Volga because it was shallowed by the drought. The waterways to the provinces of Viatka, Perm, and Kazan were not navigable during the late fall and winter because of the poor weather. In areas where relief measures could penetrate and be initiated, they were carried out, and starvation was successfully fought even though the peasants merely lived from hand to mouth. The conditions, however, were indescribably terrible in remote areas where relief measures could not penetrate because of the poor transportation network.

Leo Tolstoi and the Famine

After witnessing the tragedy of the famine of 1873, Count Leo Tolstoi went to Moscow and published an article on November 6, 1892 in the Moscow Gazette. Entitled "A Terrible Question," it opened the eyes of the government to the crisis. In the article he said that the people were starving because the rich ate too much and suggested that the government should import foreign grain. This article proved to be unpopular with the government and the paper received a warning from the Minister of the Interior because of it. During the famine of 1891-92, Tolstoi was an ardent and outspoken critic of government officials. He felt they did not understand the true causes of the famine, they did not have a true picture of what was really going on in the afflicted regions, and were mishandling relief efforts. He wanted the government to accumulate exact statistics by sending officials into the villages and compiling from individual inquiries information needed for wise and efficient aid. <19> Tolstoi claimed that the government provided no help for laborers who were able to work and for those with horses or cattle. He reported that large quantities of grain were either stolen or allowed to spoil, thus wasting precious food and money.

Tolstoi proposed the establishment of large-scale public works and the regulation of grain while forbidding the hoarding of flour. He advocated the opening of sufficient free eating houses in famine- villages, along with the organization of all available voluntary forces in national relief work. All of these suggestions were ignored by St. Petersburg, however. He therefore left Yasnaya Polyana and went to his estate in the Dankovsky district where he gathered information on the needs of each family and individual. He set up eating

rooms of his own that provided two meals a day and a supply of wood for fuel during the winter in exchange for work. However, for the most needy it was free. Meanwhile his wife was doing her part by collecting donations for his work in Moscow. He also opened soup booths in twenty-two villages, and set up corn and clothing stores for those enduring the tragedy. In his heart, he revolted against the necessity of such efforts, thinking it was abominable that he had to feed the people by whom he was fed. He complained that he was ". . . distributing the vomit sicked up by the rich." <20>

Tolstoi also made sure that the horses and work materials were supplied to the *muzhiks*. This enabled them to make their own clothes and shoes. He bought the surplus goods at full price and distributed them among the poorest people. To prevent a repetition of the famine, he provided seed and replaced horses so the peasants would be able to plant and prepare for the next harvest. <21> He remained in the famine areas until after the good harvest of 1893, which brought the territory back to normal.

The West, particularly the United States, helped the relief effort by contributing money and food to the famine stricken area. Western newspapers such as *The Times* of London sent correspondents into the area to report on the situation first hand. They described in great detail the horrors they saw and were partly responsible for the foreign aid that came into Russia. The journalists pleaded for their readers to contribute to the relief effort to help the starving. The Iowa Auxiliary of the Red Cross sent a cargo of corn rather than money because the correspondents described how inefficiently the aid was getting to the peasants. <22> Sympathetic Philadelphians sent six million, pounds of flour that had been collected by merchant millers to Russia. The relief movement was started by the publisher of *Northwestern Miller*, W.C. Edgar, who assembled a donation collected from states. Transportation was provided free of charge by railroads and sent on two steamships from New York to the Baltic port of Libau. Mr. Edgar accompanied the expedition and wrote articles about the situation and encouraged others to help in the relief. <23> Some unscrupulous merchants used the charity of foreigners to their own advantage, however. In December 1891, the urban committee of St. Petersburg bought 300,000 pounds of grain from some merchants at Linau and later discovered it was heavily adulterated with dust and so, unusable.

Conclusion

The Russian famine of 1891-92 was an incredible disaster, not only for the misery it caused, but due to the fact that it could either have been prevented entirely or at least its impact lessened. The effectiveness of the government relief effort has been under debate for many years. Statistics show that few actual cases of starvation were reported, but that is misleading because the majority of people died from diseases accompanying the famine. The government attempt to establish a system of public works to provide employment was a complete failure. However, government assistance averted the threat of mass starvation and prevented the total economic collapse of the region, despite the massive obstacles impeding the relief effort. One of the major impediments to efficient relief was the lack of cooperation between various ministries. The famine brought into view the corruption and inefficiency of the government, and showed how St. Petersburg

was so out of touch with the vast portion of the country. It also exposed the dire poverty of the peasants, which could be traced back to emancipation and beyond. This famine, which pointed out the weakness of their social structure, should have been a huge warning to the government. The tsarist regimes, however, failed to address adequately Russia's massive agricultural problems that ultimately helped lead to the government's downfall. The tsars' Soviet successors did not fare any better. The country continued to be plagued by famine, including the one caused by the policies of Stalin in 1931-32. Soviet attempts to solve Russia's agriculture problems, such as Khrushchev's Virgin Land project, all ultimately ended in failure. One hopes that Boris Yeltsin has recognized and learned the lessons that the famine of 1891-92 can teach.

Notes

1 J. Stradling and W. Reason, *In the Land of Tolstoi* (London James Clarke and Company, 1897), p. 37.

2 R. Robbins, *Famine in Russia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1975), p. 19

3 C. Smith, "The Famine in Russia," *North American Review*, CLIV (1892), 543.

4 Stradling and Reason, 14.

5 W. Edgar, "Russia's Conflict With Hunger," *American Review of Reviews*, V (1892), p. 576.

6 *Ibid.*, 579.

7 Stradling and Reason, 19.

8 M. Halstead, "Politics of the Russian Famine," *American Review of Reviews*, V (1892), 572.

9 Edgar, 692.

10 E. Lanin, "Famine in Russia," *Fortnightly Review*, LVI (1891), p. 640.

11 *Ibid.*, 647.

12 Edgar, 698.

13 Robbins, 62.

14 Edgar, 693.

15 *Ibid.*

16 S. Stepnik, "The Russian Famine and the Revolution," *The Fortnightly Review*, LVII (1892), 359.

17 Robbins, 75.

18 Edgar, 695.

19 Stradling and Reason, 45.

20 M. de Courcel, Tolstoy: *The Ultimate Reconciliation* (New York Charles Scribner's Sons, 1988), 22.

21 Stradling and Reason, 59.

22 "Aid For Starving Russians," *The Nation*, LVI (1892), 130.

23 "American Relief to Russia," *American Review of Reviews*, LIV (1892), 267.

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