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Debate

Stalin and the Soviet Famine of 1932–33: A Reply to Ellman*

R. W. DAVIES & STEPHEN G. WHEATCROFT

Abstract

This Reply, while confirming that Stalin's policies were ruthless and brutal, shows that there are no serious grounds for Ellman's view that Stalin pursued a conscious policy of starvation of the peasants during the famine. It also rejects Ellman's claim that in their recent book [Davies and Wheatcroft (2004)] the authors neglect Soviet policy and leadership perceptions in their account of the famine.

IN HIS ARTICLE IN *EUROPE-ASIA STUDIES*, MICHAEL ELLMAN (2005) criticises our book *The Years of Hunger: Soviet Agriculture, 1931–1933* (Davies & Wheatcroft 2004) on the grounds that we concentrate on 'impersonal structural and agronomic factors' rather than dealing with Bolshevik policy. He advises us that, in order to have a complete understanding of the famine, it is also 'necessary to look closely... at the *perception* of the situation by the *vozhd*' himself' (Ellman 2005, p. 824).

In contrast to our alleged approach, he claims that 'there is some evidence that in 1930–33... Stalin also used starvation in his war against the peasants', 'in other words... a conscious policy of starvation', and he frequently refers to 'the starvation policy of 1932–33' (Ellman 2005, p. 825). [He acknowledges, however, that 'it is entirely possible that... the intended deaths were only a small—possibly very small—proportion' (Ellman 2005, p. 834)]. In a rather ambiguous discussion of the place of this alleged policy in the long-term trends in Bolshevik perceptions, he also argues in terms of a continuum between Lenin's attitude to the 1891–92 famine and Stalin's handling of the 1932–33 famine (Ellman 2005, pp. 831–832).

In this reply we first summarise our own approach to the famine and then discuss Ellman's assessment of the role of deliberate starvation. Ellman's account of our views

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is extremely distorted. We certainly stress the importance of structural and agronomic factors. But the perceptions of Stalin personally, the leadership as a whole, and the party activists, are also central objects of our attention, as well as the ‘impersonal factors’. In the final paragraph of our book, for example, we specifically state that ‘Stalin’s policy towards the peasants was ruthless and brutal’ and among other factors influencing agricultural policies we refer to ‘the *modus operandi* of the Soviet system as it was established under Stalin’ (Davies & Wheatcroft 2004, p. 441). We do hold that the famine of 1931–33 had important features in common with other famines, but Ellman’s assertion that ‘Davies and Wheatcroft argue that the 1931–34 famine was not a unique event necessitating a unique explanation’ is a travesty of our position (Ellman 2005, p. 834).

What is our own view of the role of Bolshevik perceptions and misperceptions as a background to the famine? First, we regard the policy of rapid industrialisation as an underlying cause of the agricultural troubles of the early 1930s, and we do not believe that the Chinese or NEP versions of industrialisation were viable in Soviet national and international circumstances. However, contrary to Ellman’s imputation, we do not consider that industrialisation policy took the only possible form. Volumes 3 and 4 of *The Industrialisation of Soviet Russia* show that at the end of the 1920s the Soviet Union adopted a *particular form* of what Ellman oversimplifies as ‘the tribute model of industrialisation’ (Ellman 2005, p. 836, n. 4). Investment and production plans in 1929–31 were not merely high, they were unfeasibly high, leading to a waste of resources, and involving the closing down and truncating of over-ambitious projects.

Secondly, Volumes 1 and 2 of *Industrialisation*, together with *Years of Hunger*, show in considerable detail the major misperceptions of agriculture that influenced Soviet policy. From 1929 onwards, it was assumed that a huge growth of agricultural machinery would be sufficient to replace horses within a few years, and that agricultural prosperity would enable the household plot to be eliminated in favour of fully socialised agriculture. As late as the spring and summer of 1931, the authorities, including Stalin personally, believed that a record harvest would occur in that year, and enable livestock to be socialised and meat and dairy production to increase rapidly.

These optimistic assumptions at first led to the conclusion that most peasants would support collectivisation, opposed only by a small number of *kulaks*. In 1930 and 1931 *kulaks* and other opponents of collectivisation were ruthlessly persecuted, but these measures were seen as compatible with and a prerequisite for rapid agricultural development. These erroneous policies and assumptions played a major part, together with ‘structural and conjunctural factors’, in bringing about the agricultural disaster of 1932–33.¹

By the summer of 1932, partly as a result of previous Soviet policies, and partly as a result of bad weather, there had been two bad harvests in succession. Although strenuous efforts had been made to build up reserve stocks, these efforts had failed completely (see Davies *et al.* 1995, pp. 642–657). There is no doubt that grain was in very short supply by the spring and summer of 1932. Most of the urban population

¹In this article the agricultural year (July–June) is indicated by a slash (e.g. 1932/35), and two successive calendar years by a hyphen (e.g. 1932–33).

were hungry; and the death rate in the towns rose sharply. The reduction in urban bread rations led to the large-scale riots of textile workers in Ivanovo region.²

As the scale of the agricultural crisis became more obvious to the party leaders, they launched changes in policy that they hoped would alleviate the position of the peasants. In May 1932 the government adopted reforms (known as Neo-Nep) which incorporated lower central grain collection targets (especially for Ukraine which was 1.3 million tons lower than the 1931/32 plan) and legalised the *kolkhoz* market. The collection plan from the 1932 harvest was reduced in a series of measures from 23.5 to 19.6 million tons, and the actual amount collected was 18.5 million tons. On 17 August 1932, the Ukrainian grain collection plan for the peasant sector (i.e. excluding the state farms) was reduced by 0.6 million tons, on 30 October by a further 0.9 million tons, and on 12 January 1933 by another 0.5 million tons. The initial Ukrainian plan for the peasant sector was 5.83 million tons as compared with the 6.47 million tons collected from the previous harvest, and the final plan was only 3.77 million tons (3.53 million were actually collected). Similarly the North Caucasus plan was reduced from 2.52 to 1.59 million tons. Once the famine was under way the Politburo, in no fewer than 35 top-secret decisions, issued between February and July 1933, provided small amounts of food to the countryside, primarily to Ukraine and North Caucasus.

These substantial changes in plan were insufficient to avoid mass starvation, but they do indicate that the government was trying to do something (though not enough) to reduce the terrible impact of the famine in Ukraine and North Caucasus. The reduction in the collections as compared with the previous year meant that the bread rations in the towns had to be drastically cut. Many workers received at best a near-starvation bread ration in the spring of 1933.³ In June and July 1933, urban death rate indicators were double the normal level in the Russian Republic and more than this in Ukraine.⁴ Grain exports—a major means of paying for machinery imports—were reduced from 4.8 million tons in 1931/32 to only 1.8 million tons in 1932/33. The initial plan was to export 6.2 million tons from the 1932 harvest! The plan to build up substantial reserve stocks of grain was also largely abandoned. The effort to build up stocks had been pursued with particular vigour from the autumn of 1931, when the military threat from Japan loomed over the USSR. As late as 9 December 1932, in spite of the difficulties with the grain collections, the revised grain plan approved by the Politburo proposed that stocks should amount to 3.7 million tons on 1 July 1933, at the end of the agricultural year. In fact they amounted to at most 2 million tons, less than on the same date three years previously. This was less than two months' supply for internal use. The food crisis in the towns, the reduced exports at a time of serious balance of payments difficulties, and the failure to build up grain stocks were all consequences of a grave crisis of grain shortage, not one simulated for political purposes. The decline in the grain collections and the subsequent crisis amounted to a major defeat for government policy, and partly for this reason was not admitted in public.

Even the reduced grain collection plan was achieved only by the use of a great deal of force. The Soviet leaders, confronted with the large grain deficit of the winter and

²On the urban food crisis of 1932, see Davies (1996, pp. 176–192).

³On the urban food crisis of 1933, see Davies (1996, pp. 368–371).

⁴See <http://www.soviet-archives-research.ac.uk/hunger>.

spring of 1932/33, as on previous occasions, but with greater ferocity, falsely attributed the shortages to the *kulaks*—and to wider sections of the peasantry who were assumed to have been influenced by them.

What in our opinion was Stalin's personal role in these events? In contrast to Ellman, who treats Stalin's perceptions of the peasants and of famine as continuous with those of Lenin, and basically unchanging, we endorse Kaganovich's famous precept that 'there were various Stalins... Before 1932 he was entirely different' (Chuev 1998, p. 154). We pay particular attention to the major *changes* in Stalin's perceptions during the stormy years of rapid industrialisation which preceded the famine. It is true that Stalin's attitude to the peasants was far from positive; he always regarded them as second-class citizens.⁵ But both his public and private statements in the mid- and late-1920s—perhaps even as late as the spring of 1932—show that he was convinced that Bolshevik policy would lead rapidly to a large increase in agricultural production and a rise in the standard of living of the peasants as well as the urban population. Before the onset of agricultural crisis in 1931, the possibility of large-scale peasant hunger, let alone starvation, played no part in Stalin's perception, and would have been dismissed by him as counter-revolutionary propaganda. Even at the time of the 1932 harvest he continued to assert that grain production was higher than in the previous year.

In 1932/33 Stalin was closely identified with most of the measures adopted during the agricultural crisis and the famine. He personally endorsed, and often specifically proposed, all the decisions on the reduction of the grain collections and the allocation of grain to the famine-stricken areas. But he also initiated and endorsed the measures involving the large-scale use of force. He certainly took a hard line. For example, he personally initiated and pushed through the Politburo the notorious decree of 7 August 1932, imposing the death penalty for the theft of grain [see *Stalin – Kaganovich* (2001, pp. 235–236) and the accompanying documents]. He was extremely nervous about the situation in Ukraine, writing to Kaganovich on 11 August 1932: 'We may lose Ukraine'. He certainly believed that the famine was the peasants' own fault. In this context he committed a crime of omission. He was entirely unwilling to admit the failure of his policies. While grain exports were cut, Stalin made no effort to secure grain assistance from abroad, partly because of the severe foreign exchange crisis, but also because this would have exposed Soviet claims about the success of collectivisation. He was more concerned with the fate of industrialisation than with the lives of the peasants.

However, we have found no evidence, either direct or indirect, that Stalin sought deliberately to starve the peasants. The top-secret decisions of the Politburo, endorsed by Stalin, never hint at a policy of deliberate starvation. Moreover, in their most secret letters and telegrams to Stalin, his closest associates Molotov and Kaganovich treat hunger and death from famine as an evil for which the *kulaks* or wider sections of the peasants, and inefficient local organisation, are largely responsible, but which must be mitigated as far as possible by local and central measures. In his letter of 15 March 1933, which Ellman cites, the Ukrainian party

⁵See his statement in January 1925 cited in Davies & Harris (2005, p. 122).

leader Kosior, while blaming the peasants for the famine, and arguing that they should learn in future to work harder, at the same time set out measures by which the local authorities should reduce the impact of the famine by supplying the population with additional food from local resources. The letter concludes with an urgent request for the supply of food grain from central funds, including an additional immediate supply for the Kiev region.⁶ This is not the kind of letter that would be addressed to a Stalin who was known to be secretly calling for the starvation of the peasants. Similarly the documents prepared in the OGPU about the famine criticise the local authorities for removing the food stocks of the peasantry and treat such behaviour as a violation of the party line. The authors of these documents evidently did not know that Stalin was pursuing a starvation policy. But if neither the central nor the local party leaders, nor the OGPU, knew of the existence of this policy, how could it be put into effect?

Our view of Stalin and the famine is close to that of Robert Conquest, who would earlier have been considered the champion of the argument that Stalin had intentionally caused the famine and had acted in a genocidal manner. In 2003, Dr Conquest wrote to us explaining that he does not hold the view that ‘Stalin purposely inflicted the 1933 famine. No. What I argue is that with resulting famine imminent, he could have prevented it, but put “Soviet interest” other than feeding the starving first—thus consciously abetting it’.⁷

We now turn to the various arguments put forward by Ellman in favour of the view that Stalin deliberately starved the peasants.

Continuity between Lenin and Stalin

Ellman claims that there was a continuity in the attitude to famine between Lenin and Stalin, both of whom, he alleges, regarded famines (or possibly just their consequences) as progressive (Ellman 2005, p. 832). On this basis he holds that the ‘political structural factor’ which led to the 1931–34 famine ‘was the communist victory in the Civil War and the resulting Communist dictatorship’ (Ellman 2005, p. 829), rather than being a result of the Stalinist version of that dictatorship. But, as Ellman hints in passing (Ellman 2005, p. 824), there was a major famine in 1921–22 and the attitude and policy of the regime, and of Lenin personally, towards this famine was entirely different from Stalin’s a decade later. The famine was openly acknowledged and substantial foreign, particularly American, aid saved many lives.

The plans for mass deportations in 1933

Ellman argues (Ellman 2005, pp. 830–831) that the planned mass deportations in 1933 were a major part of Stalin’s call on 27 November 1932 for a ‘crushing blow’ against the resistance of what Stalin referred to as ‘certain collective farmers and

⁶See *Tragediya* (2001, p. 657). Additional grain to Ukraine for seed and food was allocated by a Politburo decision of 18 March.

⁷Letter of September 2003, cited in Davies & Wheatcroft (2004, p. 441, n. 145).

collective farms'.⁸ He then claims that (Ellman 2005, p. 831) the near-abandonment of this scheme provides '*circumstantial evidence*' that Stalin decided that starving the peasants was a more efficient means of eliminating 'class enemies'.⁹ In fact, the plans for mass deportation were abandoned because of the unwillingness and inability of the regional authorities to assimilate such a large number of people, and because of the disasters that ensued, including the Nazino tragedy. Oleg Khlevnyuk concludes that these disasters 'apparently...completely discredited the labor exile plans in the eyes of the supreme leadership' (Khlevnyuk 2004, chapter 2, especially p. 67).

We also very much doubt that Stalin believed that the deaths from famine in the first half of 1933 had served the function of getting rid of an adequate number of class enemies. He surely knew that these deaths occurred among a very large variety of different types of peasants, including ordinary collective farmers, and that—if there were *kulaks* in the villages—many of them would have remained, in those areas less affected by the famine.

The argument from authority

Ellman attaches great weight to the views expressed by our late colleague Viktor Danilov, even erecting a kind of 'cult of personality' in support of his arguments. He states that 'in addition to the evidence presented in this reply, there is also the argument from authority (the late Viktor Danilov)' (Ellman 2005, pp. 835, 843). Fortunately we do not have a Pope in the study of Soviet history, and Danilov would certainly have resented this attitude to his work. The authors of this reply worked with Danilov over many years. One of us first became acquainted with him in 1963, then met him frequently in the next 40 years in good times and bad, and was very close to him both personally and academically. He was a great historian who made an outstanding contribution to our knowledge of the Russian and Soviet peasantry. But there is no doubt that his understandable bitterness about Stalin and Stalinism, which he regarded as a betrayal of socialism and the October Revolution, sometimes over-influenced his conclusions. On one famous occasion, he wrote a draft article that misinterpreted the statistics of grain stocks in 1933 which he found in the archives, and wrongly stated that the stocks were very high in July 1933 (4.53

⁸He suggests that Stalin's proposed 'crushing blow' 'included (and possibly comprised exclusively) further mass deportations' (Ellman 2005, p. 831). But there seems to be no reason to link Stalin's proposed blow with the deportations of 1933 rather than with the many repressive actions in December 1932, which followed his speech. It is our provisional opinion that the scheme for mass deportations, which covered various categories of undesirables from the towns and from the western frontier regions as well as the peasants, emanated from Yagoda in the OGPU rather than being strongly advanced or even actively supported by Stalin.

⁹Ellman wrongly states that 'the 1933 deportations are not discussed in Davies and Wheatcroft' (Ellman 2005, p. 839, n. 45). See Davies & Wheatcroft (2004, p. 224, n. 347 and n. 348), where we report the decision on 10 March 1933, to exile one million people to West Siberia and Kazakhstan, and the reduction of this figure to 500,000 two months later. We decided to deal with these decisions briefly because they were very largely abandoned, and did not exercise any substantial influence on the course of agricultural development or of the famine.

million tons!) (see Davies *et al.* 1995, pp. 642–643). Danilov never submitted this article for publication, but for a time this mistake played a substantial role in the debate about whether Stalin deliberately organised the famine. And, in spite of lengthy and frequent discussions with the two of us about the 1932 harvest, Danilov appears to have deferred on this matter to the view of his colleague Zelenin, who kept reverting to the mistaken view that the 1932 harvest was larger than the harvest of the previous year.

'Accusation in a mirror'

Ellman attaches great importance to the concept that Stalin denied his own action in deliberately starving the peasants by projecting it on to others. In a revealing footnote, he states that 'I too belonged to the "unintentional" school' before Karel G. Berkhoff drew his attention to Stalin's 'accusation in a mirror' (Ellman 2005, p. 837, n. 15). But 'accusation in a mirror' is only a rather different way of describing Stalin's very well known use of scapegoats.¹⁰ Stalin put the blame on scapegoats in several different contexts. On 2 March 1930, he published his article 'Dizzy with Success' to cover up his responsibility for the *unexpectedly* unfavourable results of 'excesses' in collectivisation by blaming them on others (in this case the local officials)—and also to announce and claim credit for the decision to soften the collectivisation policy. In the case of the Katyn murders, he denied an action that he had *consciously and deliberately* authorised by blaming it on others (in this case the Nazis), but *without any change in policy*. Ellman appears to regard Stalin's statement to Sholokhov in May 1933 blaming peasants for seeking to starve the workers and the army as analogous to the denial of the Katyn murders—according to Ellman, Stalin was projecting on to the peasants the starvation which he had deliberately organised (Ellman 2005, pp. 824, 826–827). But the situations are different. In the case of Katyn we have the record of the explicit proposal to the Politburo which was endorsed by Stalin; the Politburo then secretly organised the executions. In the case of the famine there are no proposals to organise starvation, no orders, no signs of any central actions directed towards this aim. On the contrary, there were many top-secret Politburo decisions—albeit very inadequate—which sought to save lives. A more appropriate analogy seems to be with 'Dizzy with Success'. In the autumn and winter of 1929–30 Stalin encouraged actions that were certainly not intended to bring about large-scale peasant unrest; he then in March 1930 blamed the local officials for the unintended consequences of his actions. Similarly, his previous actions played a large part in bringing about the famine of the winter and spring of 1932–33, but he then blamed 'a minority' of the peasants for the famine.

Another aspect of Stalin's 'scapegoatism' is worth noting. It is only the naming of scapegoats *before* the event that can be adduced as evidence of a guilty *intention*. Scapegoating *after* the event is evidence only of a wish to escape blame for the consequences of a policy. But the letter to Sholokhov in May 1933 was written not

¹⁰The *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* defines 'scapegoat' as 'one who is blamed or punished for the sins of others'.

before the event but only when the famine had already reached its peak, and the speech of May 1935 was made two years after the event [*pace* Ellman (2005, p. 832), this speech in any case cannot be interpreted as justifying famine]. This is very weak evidence indeed of Stalin's intention to cause starvation.

Ellman's proposal to estimate the number of peasants deliberately starved by Stalin

Ellman seems to think that it would be relatively easy to assess whether Stalin did intentionally attempt to starve the peasants. He claims that (Ellman 2005, p. 834) 'in principle, it would be possible to make estimates of the relative importance' of (a) 'exogenous non-policy-related factors', (b) 'policies... which had excess deaths as an unintended consequence', and (c) 'policies aimed at killing people'—shootings and starvation. This would be achieved by 'a model of the factors determining agricultural output and mortality in this period'. According to Ellman, such work is 'a challenge for the future' (Ellman 2005, p. 834) and 'a fruitful area for further research' (Ellman 2005, p. 835).

We look forward to the results of Ellman's endeavours in this direction but we venture to suggest that death is a complex phenomenon that is the result of many interacting causes. Part of the population would have died in these years under normal circumstances (whatever may have counted as normal). Ellman will need to assess the causation of excess mortality and to assign it to the separate types of causes. It will be difficult enough to separate out the level of excess deaths caused by exogenous non-policy related factors, and those unintended deaths caused by policies. But how would he know what policies were meant to starve people to death, as this was nowhere stated to be the intent, and how would he be able to assess the extent to which this occurred and separate it from normal mortality and the mortality caused by other factors that were also contributing to food shortages?

In our view, it will be inherently impossible to estimate the number of deaths from the numerous policy decisions approved by Stalin, even if they were intended to produce starvation. Usually basing himself on the recommendations of the Committee for Agricultural Collections (*Komzag*), Stalin sometimes approved proposals to reduce the amount of grain to be collected from a region or republic, or to allocate grain to a region as seed, food or fodder, and sometimes rejected them. Decisions to refuse grain to a region or to insist on fulfilment of the delivery quota sometimes resulted in starvation. It would be very difficult to work out how far deaths in a region were the result of a particular decision. But even if this proved possible, there is no way of knowing *why* Stalin took a particular decision: did he believe it to be essential because otherwise the towns would starve? Did he wrongly believe that peasants in the region had hidden stores of grain? Or did he positively want peasants to starve to death, as Ellman hypothesises? It seems to us that Ellman's proposal to estimate the deaths caused by the alleged 'starvation policy' is non-operational.

Ellman's rash conclusions

In his conclusions Ellman abandons caution and presents as established fact a series of propositions which are presented much more tentatively in the body of the article

(Ellman 2005, pp. 834–835). According to Ellman, the party leaders ‘regarded it [the famine] as a necessary cost of the progressive policies of industrialisation and the building of socialism under conditions of fierce class warfare... it was just one aspect of a necessary policy of attracting resources from agriculture for industrialisation’ (Ellman 2005, p. 835). The evidence for this presented by Ellman is negligible.

Ellman then explains that the famine, according to the party leaders, ‘also [1] eliminated class enemies more efficiently than deportation, [2] improved the grain balance by reducing rural overpopulation, and [3] was a disciplinary measure which made a useful contribution to socialising the rural population’.¹¹ Ellman presents no evidence whatsoever that the leaders believed propositions [1] and [2]. With regard to proposition [3], some leaders certainly stated that the peasants had come to realise that if they did not work they would starve—but no one said or hinted that starvation was imposed as a *disciplinary measure*. Ellman explains that his exposition is important ‘for non-specialists unfamiliar with Bolshevik thinking’. Non-specialists should be warned that Ellman’s version of Bolshevik thinking (Ellman 2005, p. 835) is a house of cards erected on extremely shaky evidence.

Why should we take trouble to resist the charge that Stalin deliberately starved the peasants? After all, our book—though Ellman appears to deny this—provides a mass of evidence that Stalin’s policies towards the peasants were ruthless and brutal. Stalin was a dictator, and bore more responsibility for the famine than any other individual. But it seems to us important to establish how far the famine was a consequence of the workings of the institutions established under Stalin and how far it was the outcome of the exceptionally vicious personality of the ruler. Ellman has taken a step backwards in the study of the subject by turning attention towards speculation about the inner workings of Stalin’s mind and away from examining his actual decisions, and analysing their intended and unintended results.

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¹¹The numbers in square brackets were inserted by us (RWD and SGW).