

Lynne Viola, "Before the Famine:
Peasant Deportations to the North"
November 8, 2005



On November 8, 2005, the Annual Ukrainian Famine Lecture was delivered by Lynne Viola (Department of History, University of Toronto), who spoke on "Before the Famine: Peasant Deportations to the North." The lecture was co-sponsored by the Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies, the Ukrainian Canadian Congress—Toronto branch, and the Petro Jacyk Program for the Study of Ukraine at the University of Toronto.

Professor Viola's research focus is on Soviet history, with an emphasis on the Stalinist period. She began working in the Soviet archives in the early 1980s and is acknowledged as one of the leading scholars in her field. She has, throughout her career, held many distinguished fellowships and awards, including the John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship. She has written or edited many scholarly works, including *Peasant Rebels under Stalin* (1996), and *The Best Sons of the Fatherland* (1987).

Professor Viola spoke about the dekulakization process in Ukraine, and focused on the experience of the deportees in the special settlements where they were forced to live. She argued that these mass deportations were the first phase in the repression of the village. They were a precursor to the Great Famine and part of the attempt by the Soviet authorities to decapitate the village of its leadership and thus stamp out any opposition to Bolshevik rule. In 1930–31 some 318,600 peasants—men, women, and children—were labeled kulaks and deported from Ukraine. This was the largest single category of Soviet citizens deported during dekulakization, and represented almost 35 percent of all deportees.

Many were sent to places like Arkhangelsk and Vologda in the Soviet Far North. These peasants were deported because they were "class enemies," and thus hostile to socialism. It was further hoped that the expropriation of kulak property would serve as capital for the new collective farms. Professor Viola further pointed out that dekulakization was used as a stimulus for the collectivization of the countryside. Either peasants joined the collective farms or they were labeled kulaks and deported.

The large-scale deportation of the peasants began in February 1930. The process was marked by chaos and disorder. There was a general lack of food and warm clothing for the deportees. As a result many died en route. Often, families were separated in this chaos. Upon arrival in the north, the able-bodied deportees were sent immediately to forced labour.

Their main work was the extraction of raw material in order to facilitate the large-scale industrialization projects of the time. They worked chiefly in the timber industry. The families of those who went to work were left behind in atrocious conditions. They were housed anywhere room could be found—overcrowding and lack of supplies led to widespread disease, malnutrition and death. Professor Viola read some heartbreaking first person accounts of these experiences. Dr. V.V. Lebedev wrote about what he saw in Vologda in the spring of 1930:

A great many dekulakized are accumulating in Vologda...They will be sent on further north, to the most distant, uninhabited and ruinous places, but they are temporarily housed in Vologda churches, the majority of which have already been long closed to believers. There they built bunks and the people are packed into the church buildings and typhus is breaking out. Horrors have begun...The gubernyi GPU called me in and the chief said to me: "If you don't liquidate the typhus—I will shoot you." I went to one of the churches together with some GPU men. A guard stood at the church, and behind the door—groans and cries. They

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opened the doors. And there I saw hell. The sick, the healthy, the dying—men, women, old people, children. And the live ones cried out and raised their arms to us: "Water! Water!" I have seen many terrible things in my life but nothing like this.

The deportees were expected to construct the special settlements in which they were to live. They were also expected to work for the state, often for 11 or 12 hours a day. The brutality of their situation was exacerbated by the fact that the OGPU (secret police) commandants in charge of the special settlements were from the bottom of the barrel of the secret police, as only the most incompetent and cruel officers would go work in the far north. Indeed, the depravity of the situation in these special settlements was in every sense as terrible as in the Gulag labour camp network. Thus, Professor Viola is quite right when she speaks of the special settlements as the "Other Archipelago."

The lecture was followed by a lively question and answer session with participation from the capacity crowd. A particularly poignant question was asked by Professor Olga Andriewsky (Trent University and CERES Fellow) with regard to the political character of the deportations. Most of the deportations were from areas that historically were the most resistant to Tsarist, and later Soviet, rule. Professor Viola acknowledged that in addition to ideological and economic considerations, politics indeed played a role in the deportations.

Professor Viola's lecture was both insightful and interesting. Her use of first-person accounts, in the form of letters written by deportees, complimented her arguments well. Her work is of particular importance because while the labour camps have been studied extensively by scholars, the plight of the "special settlers" is relatively unknown and unexplored. It is hoped that with the work of Professor Viola and other such scholars, this area will continue to be investigated and we will gain a greater understanding of why the Ukrainian experience under Soviet rule was such a tragic historic episode.

Orest Zakydalsky, CERES