

R.W. Davies and S.G. Wheatcroft, *The Industrialisation of Soviet Russia*, volume 5. *The Years of Hunger: Soviet Agriculture, 1931-1933* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004. Pp. xvii+555. 49 tabs.)

R.W. Davies, Emeritus Professor at the University of Birmingham, began *The Industrialisation of Soviet Russia* in 1929 where E.H. Carr's *History of Soviet Russia* left off. Two volumes have begun the story of the collectivisation of peasant farming in 1929 and 1930. Two more have followed the Soviet urban economy through rapid expansion, turmoil, crisis, and adjustment as far as 1933. The present fifth volume deals with the rural crisis. It is the result of many years' collaboration between Davies and his co-author, S.G. Wheatcroft, Professor of History at the University of Melbourne, including painstaking labour in the vast archives of the Soviet state, party, economy, and security services.

The central event of *The Years of Hunger* is the famine of 1932-33, which was the greatest catastrophe to befall the Soviet Union's citizens in peacetime. The book does not document the human experience of the famine; rather, it chronicles the political and economic decisions and processes that led to the famine and managed its consequences. Picking up from the end of the first volume, the first two of 13 chapters describe the resumption of the collectivisation of peasant farming in 1931 and the campaign to remove the kulaks (rich peasants) and their families from their native countryside. Six chapters deal with grain sowing and harvesting and state collections in 1931, 1932, and 1933. Four chapters are devoted to topics that would otherwise have been neglected by a narrow emphasis on grain: the production and distribution of non-grain crops, the livestock sector, the role of nationalised 'state farms', and the impact of these events on the organisation of the collective farm. A concluding chapter then lays out the significance of the famine: what were its dimensions in historical comparison? How did it spread? What were its effects, and who was most affected by it? Finally, what were its causes?

The main findings are as follows. The authors' best estimate of the number of famine deaths in 1932-1933 is 5.5 to 6.5 millions (p. 401), the total population of the Soviet Union at that time being roughly 140 millions; the main scope for error in famine deaths arises from unregistered deaths and uncertainties over "normal" infant mortality. The main areas affected were the Ukraine, Kazakhstan, and the north Caucasus. There was an increase in urban mortality, but most deaths were recorded amongst the agricultural population.

The main cause of the famine (pp. 431-9) was that under the first five-year plan the state placed excessive pressure on agricultural resources and the rural population. The most obvious symptom of this pressure was the rising trend of state grain collections which stripped the countryside of food. The state, bent on imposing its authority on the peasantry, not only removed too much food but also used its control of newly socialised agriculture to force an over-extension of grain sowings. Crop rotations were abandoned and the quality of cultivation declined. While food reserves dwindled the agricultural population fed itself increasingly at the expense of its livestock. Herds declined, bringing a shortage of the draught power essential for timely cultivation. Finally, in the growing season of 1932 the weather was unusually unfavourable at a moment when the normal elasticity in the system for food production and distribution had been destroyed. In the terminology introduced by Amartya Sen, the Soviet

famine of 1932-33 reflected a mixture of 'food availability decline' with simultaneous loss of 'entitlement' on the part of a significant segment of the agricultural population (p. 402).

Davies and Wheatcroft pay tribute to *The Harvest of Sorrow* (1986), the 'classic study' (p. xiv) of the famine by Robert Conquest. Conquest and others have claimed that in 1932 Stalin intended to punish their resistance to his rule by starving millions of Ukrainians to death. Were this true, it would justify classification of the famine as an act of genocide. The evidence provided by Davies and Wheatcroft does not support this story, however. The famine was not confined to the Ukraine. It came about because Stalin and his circle placed the plans of the state above the aspirations of the peasantry, did not trust the peasants not to conceal their harvests or withhold them from the state, and expected the rural officials to take the peasants' side: thus the Ukrainian party boss Kosior complained that his agents in the countryside 'often became prisoners of notions about the absence of grain' (p. 95). This mindset led to a disregard of statistical warnings of shortage, which Kosior dismissed as 'kulak arithmetic' (p. 155). The press warned that 'the kulak comes forward as a defender of the compilation of "balances", of hiding the grain from the state by deliberately underestimating surpluses' (p. 96). For a time these claims were supported by secret police reports of harvest concealment in the provinces (p. 149). As the hunger intensified Kosior claimed that grain-rich peasants were maliciously imposing 'real hunger (the children swell up)' on their own families (p. 206). Particularly notable are the mechanisms that led so many middle- and lower-level officials, torn between conflicting loyalties to the leadership and the communities from which they came, chose complicity with the policies that spread the famine or were manipulated into it.

Once excess deaths began to be reported in significant numbers, it became clear that these were an unintended and unwelcome consequence of the state's policies. Grain collections were reduced and exports curtailed. Limited food assistance was provided to the affected areas, with priority given to feeding children. But refugees were also rounded up, typically being returned to the hungry villages from which they had fled. The authors conclude (p. 441): 'We do not at all absolve Stalin from responsibility for the famine. His policies towards the peasants were ruthless and brutal. But [our] story ... is of a Soviet leadership which was struggling with a famine crisis which had been caused partly by their wrongheaded policies, but was unexpected and undesirable ... Above all [these policies] were a consequence of the decision to industrialise this peasant country at breakneck speed'.

*The Years of Hunger* is a grim, fascinating work with some of the qualities of a classic tragedy. The pride, ambition, and folly of a few determined the fate of millions. The reader knows the outcome beforehand but is still gripped by the narrative. There was no justice for the victims at the time; as for the perpetrators, Davies and Wheatcroft have done the best justice that historians can deliver, writing long after the event.