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TAH: A More Perfect Union Year 3
Final Paper

Review of:
*The Harvest of Sorrow: Soviet
Collectivization and the Terror Famine*
By Robert Conquest

One does not often think of the Bolshevik Revolution as an inherently anti-peasant event. The ideological aspirations of the Bolsheviks for an egalitarian, Marxian nation is exemplified in the hammer and sickle. This was to show the urban proletariat and the rural farmer working together and uniting as one to overcome the bourgeoisie. Like all revolutions that destroy the old order in favor of the new, the ideological aspirations were adhered to in theory. Everything was done to reach some further level of socialism in the future. But in practice, in the present, the actions sought to destroy the very population that was promised so much when the revolution finally came. In Robert Conquest's book, *The Harvest of Sorrow: Soviet Collectivization and the Terror Famine*, treatment of Soviet (Russian) peasants is studied from the days of the Tsar to the infancy of the Revolution and finally through Stalin's reign. While some aspects are not expanded upon, Conquest's treatment of Soviet collectivization is both an in depth and chilling examination.

“The peasant’s position was, until 1861, that of a serf – one usual Russian word (*rab*) meaning in fact ‘slave’ – whom his landlord actually owned, subject to higher authority.”¹ This is not new information. The Russian chasm between rich and poor is documented and widely known. This is part of what fueled a classist revolution. While they did not have a huge urban proletariat, they had poor peasants. Conquest sheds new light on this in his examination of both Marxists’ and Lenin’s feelings towards the peasantry. “But as regards the ‘backward’ peasantry, one now finds expressions of hatred and contempt among the Marxist, and especially among the Bolshevik, intellectuals going far beyond Marxist theoretical disdain...”² Instead of the peasants being seen as part of the proletariat, they were seen as a hindrance to the revolution. Conquest continues his description: “The townsman, particularly the Marxist townsman, was not even consistent in his view of what was wrong with the peasantry, varying between ‘apathetic’ and ‘stupidly greedy and competitive.’”³ Even in the pre-Lenin days of Russian Marxism, the peasants were seen as a detriment to the cause. Lenin often restated Marx’s quote about the “idiocy of rural life.”⁴ Therefore, in terms of grain requisition, there was a view that the food was going to the truer revolutionaries – the food was going to the people who were going to rebuild the country, not keep it backward and rural.

Nowhere was this truer than in the Ukraine. Being a peasant in the Ukraine was, in the eyes of the Bolsheviks, two strikes. Ukrainians were discriminated against and already

¹ Conquest, Robert. *The Harvest of Sorrow: Soviet Collectivization and the Terror Famine*. 1st ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 1986. Print. Page 14.

² Ibid page 20.

³ Ibid page 20.

⁴ Ibid page 20.

seen as enemies of the party because of their Ukrainian nationalism. To compound this by being a rural peasant meant that when famine occurred, no one would be hit worse. Russia had been for years trying to “Russify” the Ukraine. “...the first Cheka chief in Kiev, the notorious Lacis, shot people for speaking Ukrainian in the streets...”⁵ When the Bolsheviks came to power they were in the midst of a civil war. In order to finance that war, grain requisitioning was instituted to feed both the people in the cities and the Red Army. “On 11 February 1919, Moscow ordered the requisition without payment of all grain ‘surplus’ above a consumption quota of 286 pounds per capita. On 19 March 1919 Lenin himself demanded 50 million poods of grain, as necessary to the Bolsheviks survival.”⁶ Throughout numerous famines, Ukrainian grain was taken to feed Russians. Regardless of whether the Ukrainians were starving, their grain was seized and their survival was not thought of.

In the early 1920’s famine swept through the Soviet Union. The “existence of the famine was admitted and, and relief from abroad was actively encouraged.”⁷ This relief came from Herbert Hoover, then part of the American Relief Administration. The Americans, at their height, were feeding 10.4 million Soviets including 3 million homeless children. All this relief, though, was reserved for ‘Russians’. Not until January 1922 was relief allowed into the Ukraine. Moscow even continued to requisition grain from the Ukraine well into 1922. The idea was that the “maximum burden” should be put on the “least loyal.”⁸ Conquest gives Hoover’s American Relief Administration three pages. There is not near enough detail given to this aspect of the Soviet Famines. Conquest does, however, cleverly show the

⁵ Ibid page 35.

⁶ Ibid page 37.

⁷ Ibid page 55.

⁸ Ibid page 56.

propaganda and truth twisting of Stalin. He explains that the 1926 edition of the Soviet Encyclopedia gives a fair account of the American involvement in relief efforts in the early 1920's. He goes on to say that the 1930 edition "told that 'under the pretext of good works' the American Relief Administration had really been concerned to lessen the crisis of production in the USA. By 1950 the... new (2nd) edition was saying that the ARA had used its apparatus to 'deploy espionage activity and support counter-revolutionary elements.'"⁹ The Cold War paradigm is clear in this reworking of history.

Lastly, Conquest's examination of the Kulaks was fascinating. History books often misspeak and call the Kulaks an ethnic group. This is especially true in many high school textbooks. As Conquest elucidates, The Kulaks were an economic group. They were the "wealthy" peasants who were seen as enemies of the party in that it was assumed that they would not want to give up their prosperity for the sake of collectivization. In the Soviet zeitgeist, though, like with many other things, the term Kulak came to be synonymous with "bad." Anyone that the party wanted to be rid of was deemed a Kulak and then liquidated. "...The average kulak's income was lower than that of the average rural official who was persecuting him as a representative of a wealthy class."¹⁰ This was the fate of millions deemed kulaks. "Not one of them was guilty of anything; but they belonged to a class that was guilty of everything."¹¹ On the whole, Conquest's book is thorough and exhaustive. However, after a closer read, the famine under War Communism and the American involvement was breezed through. This section could have been bigger and would have added much more depth to an otherwise compelling depiction.

⁹ Ibid page 57.

¹⁰ Ibid page 118.

¹¹ Ibid page 143.