Red famine – Stalin's war on Ukraine
Anne Applebaum

A thorough, and thoroughly gripping account of a ruthless mass murder

Applebaum does an extraordinary job of unearthing a history that has been purposefully obfuscated and buried in a most deliberate manner. Her style is to look at archives, but also rely quite a bit on oral history. The oral histories are woven throughout the chapters of the book.

It is a constantly repeating litany. The Holodomor was not a onetime thing. It was a culmination of a series of famines induced by Soviet policy, starting from the very beginning of the Soviet Union. One learns a great many things from this book.

The first thing one observes is the traditional Russian disdain for the Ukrainians. Although they were part of the Empire, even under the tsars, their language was depreciated, not respected, treated as a mere dialect of Russian. As a guy who speaks Russian but hasn't managed Ukrainian even after ten years, I can testify that this is absolutely not true. The people were regarded as uncouth peasants. It is true that Ukrainian was the language of the peasants because the Russians had been more successful in forcing Russian as a language in this upon the cities and the eastern countryside.

The disdain for which, in which the Russians held Ukrainians is echoed in today's media. The people in America who would support Putin, such as Paul Craig Roberts, Ron Paul, the Unz review, the Saker and others, go out of their way to disparage Ukrainians. They called the leadership in modern Ukraine fascists, corrupt oligarchs, and so on. The habit of putting down Ukrainians seems to be deeply ingrained and of very long-standing, going back more than a century.

Ukraine's geography features few natural geographical boundaries. The most formidable, the Carpathian Mountains in the Southwest are not very tall or rugged. Otherwise there is nothing but forest and steppe. Ukraine has been invaded from all sides since time immemorial.

Applebaum correctly says that the relationship of the Ukrainian language to Polish and Russian is rather similar to that of Italian to Spanish and French. I the reviewer note that just as Italian a somewhat closer to Spanish, Ukrainian is somewhat closer to Polish. It is distinct enough from Russian that I, a Russian speaker, cannot get by Ukrainian. A good many Ukrainian words, such as onion, tomato and color, are cognates of Polish and Western European languages, not Russian.

Ukrainians always maintained a unique identity, even under the Poles and the Russians. Their language was recognized as different, at least a strong dialect. Their music, food, and way of life were different.

Voltaire noted that the Ukrainians long to be free, their own masters, even when they were under the yoke of Poland and Russia. Nevertheless, they acquired some of the features of their overlords. Russian orthodoxy held sway in the East; the Catholic Church in the West.

Ukrainian was the language of the countryside; Polish, Russian and Yiddish were the languages of the city. The Ukrainians resented them all. They shared the anti-Semitism of Poles and Russians.

When Alexander II manumitted the serfs in 1861 it had a disproportionate effect on Ukrainian speakers, who made up a large share of the Russian Empire's peasant class. This sparked the sense of Ukrainian identity. Ukraine produced its first native language poet, Taras Shevchenko.

Recognizing the threat that the Ukrainian language posed, successive tsars refused to recognize its legitimacy, even as they allowed national languages and other parts of the Empire.

The period prior to World War I saw nationalist sentiment rise almost everywhere. Ukraine was no exception. The tsars had to backpedal and grant Ukrainians a fair amount of civil liberty, including significantly the right to use the Ukrainian language in public.

The collapse of the two bordering empires, Habsburg and Russia, at the end of World War I gave Ukraine its moment of opportunity. It declared independence. The Poles quickly put that to an end in the West, annexing Galicia and Volyn at a cost of 10,000 Polish lives, 15,000 for the Ukrainian defenders. The situation in the East was more complex.

The series of famines started during the period of Ukrainian independence in the wars between the declaration of the Soviet Union in 1917 and the final conquest of Ukraine in 1921-22. The battles were fought back and forth.

The Ukrainians and the Soviets were up in arms against the rich landowners. Class warfare, socialism, had been a hot theme for the prior 50 years of tsarist rule.

Virulent ideology turned out to be a problem. Anarchy cannot manage an Army. The various factions of peasant rebels were unable to effectively fight a war. Although the Bolsheviks were fairly universally feared and despised in Ukraine, the Ukrainians were never able to pull themselves together to decisively repel them. In particular, their anti-bourgeois attitudes made it difficult for them to form alliances with the White army, which was an aristocratic affair, and bias against Russians excluded Russian peasants who were also fighting the Bolsheviks. It was general chaos. The revolutionary theory of redistribution of all wealth was something that left no people with education and ability in charge, and alienated people who were who could not be counted among the poor peasants.

There are a couple of useful maps in the beginning of the book. The most telling is the one showing where the deaths occurred throughout Ukraine. Overall Applebaum estimates that 13% of the population died, and most of the provinces averaged 10 to 15% mortality. This was other sources would lead you to believe that the deaths were concentrated in the steppe region. No – the Kyiv oblast, which is in the north, suffered 20% mortality. Actually, the Donbass came off better than the others. It was already more industrial, especially on dedicated to coal production, and the Soviets could not afford to kill their industrialization. Moldova, then the province of Ukraine, suffered. The westernmost provinces of Podolia and Volyn, not extending as far as today's Lviv, then in Poland, suffered just as much as the rest.

Applebaum assigns the blame more to Stalin than anybody else. Stalin conceived the plan of collectivization and was single-minded about its implementation. Despite wave after wave of protests from people, including our people in the party hierarchy, he refused to waiver on his commitments to collectivization. Collectivization deprived the individual farmers of their own private property. Everything, houses, car cows, fields and such went into the collective. The individual owns nothing. It was very dispiriting, and they simply refused to work in large measure. There was also a great deal of theft. What belongs to everybody belongs to nobody. Writing now in 2017, I would either reviewer often hears anecdotes from the Soviet times about just such theft. Our people they had no compunction about stealing from the state.

Applebaum claims that Stalin knew of the effects of his policy. The observation is that the Ukrainians were unreliable and had to be decisively broken. They had been obdurate, rebellious, in tsarist times, during the first years of the USSR, and even in the 1920s. Applebaum quotes a historian, a certain Lemkin, as saying that genocide involves doing away with not just the genome but the culture, history, literature, language – everything associated with a people. Stalin took strong measures in every direction. The intelligencia, especially Ukrainians, suffered the most. Jews, having no agricultural land, and Germans and Poles, having external connections, suffered somewhat less.

The Soviet methods even of 1917 echoed the Russian methods of today. They set up local committees, ostensibly autonomous, but in fact puppets of the Russians, to stage a phony revolution or mount a phony protest, after which the benevolent Soviet government (today, Russian) hastens to recognize this "legitimate" manifestation of the will of the people and to provide it armed support. The Soviets also were experts at dividing, setting people against people. Applebaum goes on at length about how the poor and middle class peasants were set against the Kulaks, the richer peasants. In the end, however, there was no hard line, there could not be. More and more of the middle and even the poor peasants became categorized as Kulaks. If they did anything against the regime, they were automatically classed as Kulaks.

The measures used confiscate grain already in use in the time of the Ukrainian wars of 1918 -21 were quite severe. Roving bands of armed "war communists" would confiscate what they could from the peasants. She described it getting worse and worse, finally, in the last chapter, the Holodomor itself, they use long metal rods to poke and probe everything, probing behind walls in cemeteries in attics behind icons in every conceivable place where there might be food hidden. They would investigate fresh dirt. Apparently there were lots of people involved in the searches, and as the searchers themselves were often quite hungry, they were highly motivated to search. She talks some of her interviews

with the survivors among these activists show that they had to psychologically dehumanize the Kulaks in order to force themselves to perform these unpleasant tasks.

In addition to being starved, a great many were forced forcibly moved. Many went to the Soviet Far East. This includes my father-in-law's family, who spent a couple of generations on Sakhalin Island on the East Coast of Russia. Others who stayed died; my wife's great-grandfather among them. Her grandmother still speaks bitterly of the experience.

One of the amazing things is the brotherhood of nations, Druzhbi Narodi theme that the Russians have played throughout the history of the Soviet Union. In Kyiv there are there remain a memorial arch to the friendship of nations and a large street named for it. So strong was the Soviet propaganda that a couple of generations had more or less forgotten the horrors of the Holodomor. However, the current war with Russia has revived the memories.

Speaking of memories, one of the things that Applebaum makes clear is that the Soviets did their best to extirpate all memory. During the 1920s they had allowed a revival of Ukrainian literature and the development of Ukrainian language dictionary, orthography, and philology. All of that was ruthlessly repressed in the 1930s. It remained so until the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991. Many of those books did not survive. Certainly, the scholars did not – and great many of them met bitter ends. My son is attempting to learn Ukrainian folk music. There is not that although there are books of folklore and folk songs, a vast amount was lost. Among the things that were lost was the tradition of village singing, of village of strolling minstrels and so on. There are two touching movie documentary movies called Bozhichi and Bekandor showing what is left of it. It is heartrending that some of the traditional songs that they sing glorify Stalin. That is how thoroughly their history was cleansed.

Applebaum's describes the people who are the activists the 25,000 whom sent by the Soviet Union to enforce collectivization and to confiscate grain in Ukraine, as consisting of local activists, Russians, and Jews. She doesn't play down the Jewish involvement very much. She assigns Lazar Kaganovich a less important role than other historians. Kaganovich was Stalin's right hand man in Ukraine for quite a period. She credits him with having protested to Stalin that the collectivization and the green levees were too severe.

The imposition of internal passports came late in the game, in the winter of 1933. This forced peasants to remain on the land. Whereas they had previously been fleeing in large numbers to the cities, across the border to Russia where things were better, and escaping the country, the system of internal passports meant that if they were discovered anywhere other than where they were supposed to be, they could be imprisoned, shot, or sent back. Basically they were condemned to remain on the land until they starved.

Soviet propaganda, supported by a reluctance of outside governments to confront the Soviet Union and later Russia itself, kept the truth about the Holodomor from being discussed for most of the 58 years leading up to the end of the Soviet Union. In her last chapter Applebaum describes various attempts, in history and fiction, to portray what happened. It is, however, only in the quarter century of Ukraine's independence that the story can be fully investigated. She gives credit to prior authors, but there was a lot of new material for her to work.

Her outline tells the story of the buildup, the Holodomor itself, and the aftermath in chronological order.

1 The Ukrainian Revolution, 1917
2 Rebellion, 1919
3 Famine and Truce, the 1920s
4 The Double Crisis, 1927– 9
5 Collectivization: Revolution in the Countryside, 1930
6 Rebellion, 1930
7 Collectivization Fails, 1931– 2
8 Famine Decisions, 1932: Requisitions, Blacklists and Borders
9 Famine Decisions, 1932: The End of Ukrainization
10 Famine Decisions, 1932: The Searches and the Searchers
11 Starvation: Spring and Summer, 1933
12 Survival: Spring and Summer, 1933
13 Aftermath