

Andrea Graziosi and Frank E. Sysyn, editors. *Communism and Hunger: The Ukrainian, Chinese, Kazakh, and Soviet Famines in Comparative Perspective*. Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies P, 2016. Conference papers first published in *East/West: Journal of Ukrainian Studies*, guest editors, Andrea Graziosi and Frank E. Sysyn, editor-in-chief, Oleh S. Ilnytzkyj, vol. 3, no. 2, 2016, pp. 3-165. viii, 158 pp. Maps. Tables. Graphs. Selected Bibliography of Socialist Famines in the Twentieth Century. \$24.95, paper.

In the recent monograph *Communism and Hunger: The Ukrainian, Chinese, Kazakh, and Soviet Famines in Comparative Perspective*, editors Andrea Graziosi and Frank E. Sysyn bring together a collection of essays that reflect critically and comparatively on elements of famine in Ukraine, China, Kazakhstan, and the Soviet Union in the twentieth century. The book includes a short preface (vii-viii) and an introduction (1-6), both written by Graziosi and Sysyn. The bulk of the edited collection is made up of six essays, written by Nicolas Werth, Sarah Cameron, Zhou Xun, Lucien Bianco, Graziosi, and Niccolò Pianciola, respectively. The first three essays focus on individual states and republics, including the USSR, Kazakhstan, and China. The last three essays present comparative approaches that analyze the similarities and differences between famine policies implemented by Mao Zedong and by Joseph Stalin. The essays in this book were originally presented as papers at the Communism and Hunger Conference in Toronto, Ontario, in 2014.

In the introduction, Graziosi and Sysyn briefly lay out their reasons for examining famines in the context of Communism. They note, "In fact, with the exception of the 1943 Bengal famine with its approximately two million victims, all of the other major famines of the twentieth century are directly connected to socialist 'experiments' ..." (1). The policies of the Great Turning Point (GTP) in 1929 and the Great Leap Forward (GLF) in 1958 act as focal points for the authors as they attempt to piece together the links between industrialization, modernization, and hunger. Particular emphasis is placed on the evolving relationship between the countryside and the city. In both the Chinese and the Soviet cases, rapid collectivization of rural areas was instigated to help feed expanding cities, and the goal that Mao and Stalin both had was to make the countryside pay for the transformation of their respective countries. Although central planning linked the policies of China and the Soviet Union, there were major differences in policy implementation and outcomes. Stalin targeted certain ethnic groups, particularly Ukrainians, and "consolidated his grip on the Party" (4) while Mao was eventually forced to admit responsibility for the disaster in China and faced weakening support. The essays that follow in the book, together, provide context for

these important discussions and prove useful in understanding the cases both individually and as part of a larger, interconnected narrative.

The first essay, by Werth (10-24), focuses on the multicausal elements of famine policy in the Soviet Union. Werth notes the differences in policy targeting Soviet Ukraine, the Kuban, the Volga region, and Kazakhstan. The author states almost immediately that Ukraine was singled out because of its nationalist tendencies. Stalin interpreted Ukrainian nationalism as a threat, and he subsequently targeted Ukrainian intellectuals, religious leaders, and political elites. In comparison, Werth notes, in the Volga region “there was clearly no national issue here, no major political threat coming from a national movement supposedly linked with émigré or foreign countries” (13). Kazakh herders, too, played an integral part in Soviet consumption as they were directed to be the main meat suppliers for Soviet urban areas. Werth’s three geographic focuses represent what he calls “epicentres,” or the main areas affected by famine. One of the strengths of Werth’s essay lies in the attention that he gives to the role of space and geography. Although he focuses on “epicentres” in the first part of his essay, he later expands his discussion to include the peripheries, where he finds important links between the urban and rural and the construction of hierarchies. The concept of the “hierarchy of consumption” (“*ierarkhiia potrebleniia*”—a phrase borrowed from Elena Osokina) demonstrates how socialism created hierarchies that put the state and its subjects at odds. Werth argues that the hierarchic system had four components: city categories, occupational categories, status in the family unit, and type of workplace (18).

Cameron, in her essay (25-39), elaborates on the discussion of Kazakhstan (Werth makes a brief mention in his essay). At the start, Cameron bases her discussion of the Kazakh famine on the premise that it is “little known in the West” (25). She provides a short background of Kazakh society, paying acute attention to the ethnic makeup of the Soviet republic of Kazakhstan. The ethnic population was primarily comprised of Turkic-speaking Muslims, and they represented a majority of the republic’s population. Cameron also notes important differences between famine in Kazakhstan and in Soviet Ukraine. In Kazakhstan, pastoral nomads were the primary victims, as opposed to peasants in Ukraine. The author argues, “Thus the dynamics of hunger in Kazakhstan were different than in the Soviet Union’s west—the flight of starving refugees, for instance, was much greater in the Kazakh famine, as nomads used their knowledge of seasonal migration routes to evade repression . . .” (28). Cameron makes an effort to lay out the historiography of the Kazakh famine in order to refute long-held notions that the famine in Kazakhstan was part of a “natural process.” In the last part of her essay, she suggests new directions for research. Most notably, she argues that “Moscow sought to construct a Union-wide food system, and shortages

in one region of the Soviet Union had implications for others” (34). This is in response to research that continues to view Soviet famines only through a national lens. Cameron also calls for further study of the death toll from famine. And she notes that some scholars have labelled the Kazakh famine a genocide—but she does not herself state where she stands on this issue. This essay is useful for those who want some general background on the Kazakh famine. But those who want more of Cameron’s analysis (rather than a focus on historiography) should read her new book *The Hungry Steppe: Famine, Violence, and the Making of Soviet Kazakhstan*.

The final essay centring on a specific state is by Xun (40-58), who analyzes the documentary evidence in relation to the Great Leap Forward. Xun contends that the Chinese famine was much more disastrous than many scholars acknowledge. Through the use of oral and archival evidence, she convincingly shows that the collectivization campaigns in the countryside were anything but neat and organized. She states, “Collectivization led to a chaotic society in which theft, sabotage, banditry, and murder were rife, because everyone was pitted against everyone else” (55). Xun focuses on state policies in order to prove that the implementation of the Chinese famine was extremely violent, but the way that she uses her sources allows the voices of regular people who lived under Mao’s directives to be heard as well. Her work is an attempt to overcome the memory gap that exists regarding the famine. Xun contends that “there is no place in China’s collective memory for the Great Famine”; this is unlike the cases of the Holocaust and the Holodomor (44). Those interested in the use of oral and archival evidence, the role of violence in the people’s communes, and state policy will find this essay particular insightful.

The last three essays in the book are meant to extend the comparative discussion of famine. Bianco (59-82) and Graziosi (83-101) both divide their essays into two parts, discussing the similarities and differences between the Soviet and Chinese famines. The authors agree that urban growth, the radicalization of agrarian policies, the denial of international assistance, and the control of population movement linked China and the Soviet Union. Bianco notes, “The Soviet internal passport system was established in December 1932 in the midst of the famine to prevent mass exodus from the countryside; while Chinese leaders imposed the *hukou* system, which forbade people born in a village to migrate and live in any city . . .” (64). Graziosi and Bianco also point out the differences between the Chinese and Soviet famines, including the link between famine and ethnicity in Soviet Ukraine; the more erratic evolution of famine in China; peasant resistance; people’s communes versus sovkhoses/kolkhoses; and the number of people killed as a result of famine. Graziosi notes that the memory of the famines is quite different; the politicization of the Holodomor has become a “catalyst of

nation building” in independent Ukraine (96) whereas the memory of the Chinese famine does not carry the same political force.

Bianco spends the latter part of his essay discussing the workforce, or so-called “actors,” that contributed to collectivization drives when the peasants were no longer able to work on account of illness, hunger, or death. The author writes, “Once manpower had become too scarce because many indigenous farmers were dead and the survivors were too weak to work, tens of thousands of students and workers in Kharkiv were forcibly dispatched to the fields . . .” (76). Bianco’s attention to the multiple actors present in Kharkiv is vital for understanding who was complicit in the collectivization campaigns. But this point should be further expanded to include the scores of workers from Germany, Czechoslovakia, and the United States who worked in Kharkiv (most in the Kharkiv Tractor Plant) and aided the Soviets in the collectivization of grain. Including these foreign workers would add to the transnational comparisons that Pianciola puts forth in his essay on pastoral Central Eurasia (102-43) and it would shed light on the appeal of Communism for those outside of the Soviet Union.

Pianciola argues that comparative studies still lack a serious understanding of the implementation of Stalinist policies in the pastoral regions of Central Eurasia. He states, “An analysis connecting the creation of Stalinist systems in the countryside of Central Eurasian pastoral regions—Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, parts of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, Xinjiang, Tibet, Qinghai, Mongolia, and Inner Mongolia—is still lacking” (102). The goal of Pianciola’s argument is to understand how Stalin’s policies affected the pastoral regions, which were important for grain and food requisition but were not the primary areas of geographic focus or importance. The author attempts to determine why these areas are less studied, and he contends, “The other main ‘grain baskets’ were far from borders, were ‘less indigenized,’ and nationalist and peasant resistance there had weaker roots” (110). Pianciola is also interested in the reasons why pastoral regions (other than Kazakhstan) did not incur famine. Here, he uses the example of Kyrgyzstan, indicating that the region was mostly spared from famine conditions because it was labelled a cotton-producing region rather than a grain-producing one. Pianciola encourages scholars to think more about economic districts, which he claims have been “overlooked by historians, who focus too much on Soviet national republics as units of analysis” (124).

Overall, the book *Communism and Hunger* is an important collection of essays, which encourage the reader to think more broadly about the relationship between Communism and famine. The world commemorated the eighty-fifth anniversary of the Holodomor in 2018. This book should be required reading for those wishing to understand the 1932-33 famine and its

connections to China, Kazakhstan, and other Soviet famines, including those in 1921-22 and 1946-47. This book is an excellent starting point for understanding certain political and economic factors related to famine. However, an examination of the people—a social history—is still waiting to be written. As Cameron reminds us with regard to the Kazakh famine, a turn toward oral testimony may allow researchers to understand the effects of Communist policy from the perspective of the people rather than of the state. It is unclear, at least in the case of the Holodomor, if scholars are willing to take on this challenge. Graziosi remains skeptical as he states that “the temporal distance from the events limits the validity of the oral-history projects that could be conducted after 1991” (97). Future scholars of the famines in the Soviet Union and China would be wise to follow Xun’s model of using oral testimonies and archival documents, together, for the construction of a more accurate picture of what took place in the “hungry” twentieth-century. These points notwithstanding, *Communism and Hunger* remains an erudite and accessible book, which scholars will find helpful time and again. Those looking to assign concise readings to undergraduate or graduate students will find the selection of individual essays most useful. And scholars working on issues related to famine, nationality, the Soviet Union, China, and Central Eurasia will be sure to add this book to their collection.

John Vsetecka
Michigan State University

Works Cited

- Cameron, Sarah. *The Hungry Steppe: Famine, Violence, and the Making of Soviet Kazakhstan*. Cornell UP, 2018.
- Osokina, Elena. *Ierarkhiia potrebleniia: O zhizni liudei v usloviakh stalinskogo snabzheniia 1928-1935 gg.* Izdatel'stvo Moskovskogo gosudarstvennogo otkrytogo universiteta, 1993.