

Communism and Hunger: Preface

Over the past two decades, researchers have made significant progress in studying the great political famines of the twentieth century. As a result of increased access to formerly closed archives and the collective efforts of the international scholarly community, we now have a rather accurate picture of the causes, dynamics, demographic impact, and consequences of the pan-Soviet famines of 1931-33, the Ukrainian Holodomor, the Kazakh great hunger, and the terrible famine of 1959-61 in China produced by the Great Leap Forward.

In 2014 the Holodomor Research and Education Consortium (HREC)—established in 2013 at the Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies of the University of Alberta with the support of the Temerty Family Foundation—organized a conference with the aim of bringing together specialists of the Soviet, Ukrainian, Kazakh, and Chinese famines to further our understanding of these tragedies through a comparative approach. While there had already been some efforts at comparing these events, a systematic study of affinities and differences had yet to be attempted. The conference organizers envisioned an exchange of knowledge and ideas on the basis of the rapidly increasing specialized literature, and an assessment of the common features and most significant differences of the famines, placing the findings within the dynamics of the histories of the respective countries.

The conference on “Communism and Hunger: The Ukrainian, Chinese, Kazakh, and Soviet Famines in Comparative Perspective” was held 26 and 27 September 2014 at the University of Toronto. The presenters at the session “The Soviet, Kazakh, Ukrainian, and Chinese Famines Compared” were Professors Nicolas Werth (Institut d’histoire du temps présent, Paris), Lucien Bianco (School for Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences, Paris), and Andrea Graziosi (National Agency for the Evaluation of Universities and Research Institutes, Rome). The second session focused on aspects of the Soviet, Kazakh, and Chinese famines, presented by Professors Niccolò Pianciola (Lingnan University, Hong Kong), Sarah Cameron (University of Maryland), Zhou Xun (University of Essex), and Ralph A. Thaxton, Jr. (Brandeis University). Professors Olga Andriewsky (Trent University) and Kimberly Manning (Concordia University) served as discussants, and Dr. Bohdan Klid (University of Alberta) and Professor Tong Lam (University of Toronto) chaired the sessions. The highlights of the conference were Professor Bianco’s evening lecture “How Soviet and Chinese Communists

Dealt with the Peasantry: A Comparison,” chaired by Professor Yincheng Wu (University of Toronto); and Professor Graziosi’s public lecture “Stalin and Hunger as a Nation-Destroying Tool.” Professor Lynne Viola (University of Toronto) moderated a round table in which all seven of the conference’s presenters and Dr. Liudmyla Hrynevych (Institute of the History of Ukraine, National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, Kyiv) participated.

The conference examined the commonalities of the famines, all of which took place in the wake of “leaps forward” unleashed by Communist parties that believed their centralized-planning targets and priorities could be controlled and manipulated. In both the Soviet and Chinese cases, these parties were led by powerful, despotic figures prepared to use any means and to profit from any circumstance to preserve power and reach their goals, often presenting themselves as the sole guarantor for the accomplishment of higher missions. Whatever the economic motivations, the famines were also political events requiring political analysis of their causes and courses.

Also subjects of discussion were the major differences between the famines: the semi-colonial mechanisms and the national question, which played a much more important role in the USSR than in China; the ability of the Chinese Communist Party to oppose at first its leader’s choices more effectively than its Soviet counterpart; the famines’ geographical specificities and their quite different causes; and Stalin’s triumph as a result of his famines versus the defeat that the Chinese famine represented for Mao in 1961 and 1962.

The conference was cosponsored by the Petro Jacyk Program for the study of Ukraine at the Centre for European, Russian, and Eurasian Studies and by the Asian Institute, both at the Munk School of Global Affairs at the University of Toronto. The Ukrainian Canadian Research and Documentation Centre (Toronto) and the Canadian Foundation for Ukrainian Studies also provided generous support.

Videos of the conference proceedings may be viewed on HREC’s webpage <http://holodomor.ca/communism-and-hunger-conference/>

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