

## Entitlement to Eat: Explaining the Ukraine Famine of 1932-1933

Written by Alex Stark

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

# Entitlement to Eat: Explaining the Ukraine Famine of 1932-1933

<https://www.e-ir.info/2011/01/20/entitlement-to-eat-explaining-the-ukraine-famine-of-1932-1933/>

ALEX STARK, JAN 20 2011

The Ukrainian Famine of 1932-1933, popularly known as the Holodomar (“murder by hunger”), defies traditional conceptions of the causes of famine, not least because scholars still do not agree on its causes. The majority of recent scholarship, led by Robert Conquest as well as Dana Dalrymple and others, has argued that the Ukraine Famine was a man-made catastrophe, caused by Stalin’s deliberately harsh procurement policy. This policy was designed to put down the Ukrainian peasantry, perceived by Communist party officials as a threat to their regime because of Ukrainian nationalism and national culture.

This idea, that Stalin used “food as a weapon” to subdue Ukrainian national movements, does not fit into either of the two arguments advocated by the larger body of famine scholarship that seeks to identify the root causes of famines. The first of the two is promoted by Amartya Sen, who contends that famines are the result of a loss of “food entitlement,” or direct or economic access to food, even without a decline in agricultural production. In contrast, the “food availability decline” approach asserts that famine is the straightforward result of a decline in agricultural production, which leaves less food available for consumption. This “FAD” approach is advocated by a small group of Ukraine Famine scholars, including Mark Tauger, who says that the Famine was actually the result of severe food shortages due to a poor harvest in 1932.

The existence of these dueling famine narratives, however, implies that in fact both descriptions are overlooking important aspects of the Ukraine Famine: neither the “food entitlement” nor the “FAD” approach takes into account the possibility that *government policy* (as Conquest and others argue), not just production levels or economic access, can have a huge impact upon whether or not people have access to food and therefore whether mass starvation occurs. Although the FAD approach identifies a food production decline as a major cause of famine, it does not anticipate that this decline can itself come from policy, not just natural causes. Similarly, Sen argues that government policy can help protect individuals after they have suffered a food entitlement loss, but he does not consider how policy itself can take away food entitlements.

To determine the cause of the Ukraine famine, it is necessary to trace the changes in food entitlements over time, as well as the total amount of food that was produced during the famine itself. The peasant condition in the Russian Empire prior to 1861 was that of serfdom, in which landlords literally owned their peasant laborers, subject to higher authority. The system of cultivation broadly resembled a Western European feudal system, in which each peasant household owned “strips” of land in each of the fields, and “observed the cycle laid down by the village as a whole,” in which one field in three was left fallow each year (Conquest 1986, 14). In the Ukraine specifically, the village commune was held jointly responsible for taxes by the village, and although there was communal control over choice of crop and field rotation, households held tenure over specific strips of land, as well as their own tools and livestock. After the Emancipation of the Serfs by Tsar Alexander II in 1861, villages were still communally responsible for taxes and administration, but peasants were technically free men, and had ownership over some (but not all) of the land that they had previously cultivated (Conquest 1986, 15-16).

By the collapse of the Tsarist regime in March 1917, peasants already “owned or rented out four times the land held by other owners,” and 89% of farmland was owned by peasants (Conquest 1986, 43). The regime’s collapse led to

## Entitlement to Eat: Explaining the Ukraine Famine of 1932-1933

Written by Alex Stark

the forcible takeover of larger estates by the peasantry, so that peasants came to own 96.8% of all land in 1918, while the average peasant holding in the Ukraine was nearly doubled. The number of landless peasants dropped by nearly half by 1919 (Conquest 1986, 43). Land “recommunalization” also occurred, under Lenin’s supervision, so that even though before the Revolution fewer than 50% of peasants were still members of the village commune, by 1927 95.5% of all holdings had reverted to the old commune system (Conquest 1986, 44).

However, a government decree in May 1918, which empowered the Commissariat of Food to “extract from the peasants any grain held in excess of quotas,” in accordance with War Communism policies, quickly set off an escalating conflict between the Communist government and the peasants, who wanted to retain the right to sell their own grain on the market (Conquest 1986, 46). In July 1918, Lenin sent in special troop detachments to forcibly collect grain. A series of peasant rebellions followed, leading to a peasant war in which from 1918-1920, just over 9 million peasants died. From 1920-21, some five million peasants perished from famine, and just under three million more died from diseases like typhus that were mainly an after-effect of the famine (Conquest 1986, 53). This famine was primarily caused by the procurement quotas that took away so much food that peasants could no longer feed themselves, but a secondary cause was the result of the disruptive events of 1918-21, in which huge cohorts of the population emigrated or died because of the fighting, leading to social and economic upheavals. This in turn caused a major decline in agricultural production, in which numbers of livestock dropped to about two thirds of pre-war levels, grain crop production declined by 57% in the period 1909-1913 and 1921, and the area sown declined from 214 million acres in 1916 to c. 133 million in 1922 (Conquest 1986, 44).

Amartya Sen, who pioneered the “food entitlement” explanation of famine, would describe the original transition from serfdom to individual land ownership as a transition from “indirect” to “direct” food entitlements, and the “recommunalization” policy as a reversal of that trend. According to Sen, a person starves not directly because of food production levels, but because he or she does not have the ability to command enough food. Each individual is endowed with entitlements to “commodity bundles of food:” this can be directly, by having legal access to all of the inputs of growing food themselves, or by exchange, which involves acquiring food by exchanging his or her labor and using the resulting wage to buy food (Sen 1981, 45-47). Under the Tsarist feudal regime, peasants only had exchange entitlements to food, since they did not own the land that they farmed, and therefore were essentially selling their labor to landlords in exchange for food. The Emancipation decree, and later takeover of estates, gave peasants a direct entitlement to food, since they now owned all of the agricultural inputs they used, including the land itself.

There are two different approaches that might be taken to the 1920-21 famine, as put forth by Sen’s dueling narratives. The food availability decline approach would argue that famine was caused by the decreases in production that led to an absolute shortage of food. However, this approach ignores the fact that this disaster was not a result of natural conditions like drought, but rather came directly from human actions. Therefore the “FAD” approach fails to explain why agriculture declined in the first place. Similarly, the entitlement approach would contend that the famine occurred because of a loss of entitlements. Sen might argue that the original Emancipation of the Serfs granted peasants a direct entitlement, since they now legally owned their own land as well as the other factors of food production. Lenin’s “recommunalization” policy removed this direct entitlement again, so that just as under the feudal system, peasants were essentially exchanging their labor for land access. It also removed an indirect entitlement in that peasants were no longer allowed to sell their products on a market. This approach largely fails because it is overly simplistic: it fails to take into account the fact that peasants living under a feudal or similar communal system had the kind of entitlements to food that were indirect, in that they exchanged labor for land use, and also direct, in that they grew their own food on this land. Sen’s entitlement system does not capture the nuanced complexity of this kind of entitlement.

Furthermore, this approach fails to take into account the effects of the policy of seizing food from peasants, a policy that did not remove any kind of food entitlement, but rather took away food after it had been produced. It could be argued that the policy took away peasants’ direct entitlement to food, which in turn caused the food availability decline by removing the incentive to produce in the first place. But Sen’s method fails to account for the fact that there was a non-market system and that the law as set forth by the government was rather arbitrary with regards to what exactly peasants were entitled to. Under Sen’s model, indirect entitlements would have to be taken away by

## Entitlement to Eat: Explaining the Ukraine Famine of 1932-1933

Written by Alex Stark

market forces, perhaps for example a sharp rise in food prices that is not accompanied by the same rise in wages, in order for a famine to occur. But in fact in this scenario, direct legal entitlements to food were taken away by the arbitrary change in law that allowed the Communist regime to forcibly take food from peasants. Since peasants were legally unable to sell their food since no market existed, they had no ability to set up exchange entitlements. Thus, in some senses, peasants had neither direct nor exchange entitlements to food. This flaw in Sen's model and the FAD model will be discussed more thoroughly with regards to the 1932-33 famine, below.

The famine crisis culminated in the declaration of Lenin's New Economic Policy in March 1921. This policy represented a Party retreat away from the brutal repression of peasants. It replaced unlimited grain requisitions with quota tax measures, leaving peasants with an excess quota of food that was allowed to be sold on the private market (Conquest 1986, 69). The Agrarian Code of 1922 recognized private ownership of farms alongside of cooperative and communal types of ownership, and in 1925 the practice of hiring wage-laborers was once again permitted. This essentially restored some of the direct and exchange entitlements to food that had been removed by the recomunalization policy. As a result, "grain production rose from 57.7 million tons per annum in 1922-25 to 73.5 million tons in 1926-29" (Conquest 1986, 70). This "food availability growth" was caused by the restoration of these entitlements, which gave peasants an incentive to produce once again. Consequently, there was no further famine during the 1920's

What explains this lack of famine and relative prosperity with regards to food? The "FAD" approach would again argue that it was simply the increase in production that prevented the occurrence of famine, while the entitlement approach would say that both the re-establishment of direct entitlements to food through the legal ownership of land, and indirect entitlements through wage-earning, restored the peasants' ability to access food. While both are superficially correct, again, both approaches fail to take into account the deeper roots of where the increase in production, and the re-establishment of entitlements, themselves came from. It was not through a lack of natural disasters or solely the workings of the market respectively, but rather directly through government policy.

Lenin's New Economic Policy left the peasants to their existence largely unmolested by the government until the beginning of 1928. However, a rapid about-face in government policy would soon lead to an even more virulent famine, the Holodomar, in the early 1930's. The Peasant ownership of land in the 1920's continued to grow: according to Conquest, "the peasant who had produced 50% of the grain before the war, and consumed 60% of what he produced, now produced 85% of grain and consumed 80% of that" (Conquest 1986, 87). However, in 1928, the Party's antagonism with the peasants re-emerged when a slight grain deficit led Stalin to believe that a grain shortage crisis was imminent. In reaction, the Politburo voted for 'emergency' measures, which encompassed the "dekulakization" and "collectivization" policies (Conquest 1986, 89). In December 1929, Stalin ordered "the liquidation of the Kulak class," or the class of wealthier peasants who owned land privately and were seen as class enemies of socialism, and who were coincidentally the most efficient producers of agricultural products. Kulaks' property, about 400 million roubles in total, was confiscated and they were deported from their villages to labor camps (Conquest 117-119).

At the same time, Lenin implemented the first Five Year Plan, which essentially rolled back the New Economic Policy. Specifically, the Plan envisioned the forced collectivization of half of the population, while re-implementing the grain collection plans that forced peasants to turn over a certain amount of their grain (Conquest 1986, 106-107). In the Ukraine, according to the country's First Secretary Stanislav Kossior as quoted by Conquest, "administrative measures and the use of force, not only against middle peasants but also against poor peasants, became a systematic component of the work not only of the district but also of provincial party committees (Conquest 1986, 153). Once again, the peasants revolted to protect their rights to land ownership and to sell their food on the private market-by one estimate there may have been as many as 40,000 rebels in the Ukraine in 1930- and once again, they were put down by Soviet forces (Conquest 1986, 155). This struggle against all of the peasants of the USSR was coupled in the Ukraine with a specific attack on Ukrainian national culture and nationalism, which had existed previously but was suspended in the early 1920's. Ukraine was not completely reconciled to Soviet rule: for example, in 1929 the Ukrainian Party and Soviet Organizations had "been particularly stubborn in arguing against unrealistic grain targets, and particularly remiss in discovering kulaks" (Conquest 1986, 220).

Stalin's response was an assault on Ukrainian intelligentsia, quickly followed by what Conquest terms a policy of

## Entitlement to Eat: Explaining the Ukraine Famine of 1932-1933

Written by Alex Stark

“terror by hunger” (Conquest 1986, 224). Grain procurements rose dramatically, while laws were passed in 1931 to forbid reserving grain for peasant needs until after procurement was fulfilled. A 1932 law provided legal sanctions to back the confiscation of grain, while another provided sentences of up to ten years in a labor camp for anyone who attempted to sell grain on the market before procurement (Conquest 1986, 174, 175 and 225). According to Conquest’s figures, throughout the 1920’s, the Ukraine and North Caucuses had provided half the total marketable grain. In 1926, for example, 3.3 million tons of grain, a total of 21% of the harvest, was taken from the Ukraine. But beginning in 1930’s, the Communist Party deliberately began to demand more grain than it knew the Ukrainian peasants could provide, in order to do away with peasant resistance. In 1930, the Party demanded that Ukraine deliver 7.7 million tons, or 33% of the total harvest, and although this only accounted for 27% of the total Soviet grain harvest, Ukraine still had to supply 38% of total grain deliveries. Thus, although the Soviet state treated all of its peasants harshly, Ukrainian peasants were singled out for even more punitive treatment. Similarly in 1931, the same 7.7 million tons was demanded, but this was out of a harvest of only 18.3 million tons, since about 30% of the grain had been lost to the inefficiencies of collectivization, or a total of 42% of their entire harvest. This left only c. 250 pounds of grain per capita for the rural population in Ukraine (Conquest 1986, 221).

Meanwhile, the method of paying collectivized peasants for their work became by the “labor day,” which meant the plowing of a hectare of land or threshing of a ton of grain. In 1930-31 the payment for one “labor day” differed from 300 or 100 grams of bread, or even starvation rations. For example, in one typical Ukrainian collective farm, the payment for 150 “labor days” was about 2 pounds of bread and 56 kopeks per “day,” which amounted to less than half a pound of bread per inhabitant per day and enough cash to purchase a single pair of poor-quality shoes per year. As a result of these policies, in many places peasants simply stopped working as hard, and total sown acreage decreased by about 4-5% in 1931 (Conquest 1986, 177). At the same time, agents of the State and Party who were working in the rural areas forcing peasants to turn over their grain received good rations from the state that allowed them to survive (Conquest 1986, 230).

As a result, even as the State took away more and more food, the peasants began to starve. Some grain was exported or sent to the cities and the army, but some was held in stocks as “State reserves” in warehouses, or even piled up in the open under guard and left to rot (Conquest 1986, 235-236). The misuse of these procurements illustrates Conquest’s contention that the resulting starvation was a “terror-famine inflicted on the collectivized peasants of the Ukraine and the largely Ukrainian Kuban...by the methods of setting for them grain quotas far above the possible, removing every handful of food, and preventing help from outside...from reaching the starving” (Conquest 1986, 4).

It is extremely difficult to estimate the number of deaths during the famine, because the Soviet government deliberately obscured its existence and refused to publish any statistics. Dalrymple notes that American and European observers have made estimates of anywhere from 1 to 10 million deaths in the year 1933, the peak of the famine, although this does not take into account the deaths that occurred before or after that year. The average of these estimates is 5.5 million, and Dalrymple concludes that this number is probably a reasonable estimate, considering that observers reported that the 1932-33 famine was as bad as or worse than the 1921 famine, during which about 5 million people died. Incidentally, this number would make the Ukraine famine one of the worst of all time with regard to number of deaths (Dalrymple 1964, 261).

Dalrymple argument, similar to Conquest’s, claims that “the famine of 1932-34, unlike its predecessors, was a man-made disaster. It was an almost direct result of the economic and social policies followed by the Soviet government during its first five-year plan...the disruptions growing out of collectivization led to the famine and death of millions of peasants” (Dalrymple 1964, 250). He also cites food production numbers to assert that “the most striking fact about food production during the famine period was that while it was less than average it was not a failure by any means” (Dalrymple 1964, 263).

His production table of the major food crops in Russia shows that production in 1932, preceding the worst year of the famine, was only about 12% below the 1926-30 average for grain, 5% below for potatoes and 30% for the less important sugar beet; thus, total production was down only 9%, while the demoralized and chaotic state of agriculture, due to forced collectivization, the elimination of Kulaks and the loss of agricultural experts in the intelligentsia might potentially have created an even greater drop in production. However, he claims that “the factor

## Entitlement to Eat: Explaining the Ukraine Famine of 1932-1933

Written by Alex Stark

that really turned the below-average crop years of 1931-32 into famine years was the food procurement policy of the government” (Dalrymple 1964, 264). Consequently, when the procurement policy was later changed, the famine ended.

According to Dalrymple, it was these increasing procurements, in contrast with similar production levels, that left less and less residual for the peasants to actually consume, resulting in famine. He quotes Barnes in saying that “grain, needed by the Ukrainian peasants as provisions, was stripped from the land...by grain collectors desirous of making a good showing” (Dalrymple 1964, 264). Furthermore, Stalin’s policy of procuring enough grain to make the peasants starve was a deliberate one, akin to genocide:

[Stalin] considered the peasants’ reaction [of opposing collectivization] as deliberate sabotage. Consequently, he was not prepared to lower the grain demands...his attitude may also have been related to the location of the famine—which was found in areas that had proved troublesome before... These included the fiercely independent Ukraine... not only were the residents of these areas a thorn in the Soviet’s side, but they were a relatively unskilled group of which Russia already had great numbers. Hence, why lower procurements when the famine would take care of these annoyances (Dalrymple 1964, 275)?

Mark Tauger offers a contrasting view. He argues that these statistics overlook “indications from other sources that these statistics are unreliable” (Tauger 1991, 70). The inaccuracy of the harvest yield measurements cited in previous scholarship stems from both the fact that the Soviet Union deliberately obscured the figures to hide the evidence of a famine, and that the measurements came from the biological yield system, which estimates the volume of the harvest before it actually happens, based upon the size of new crops in the field. The biological yield system actually exaggerated the real harvest yield by more than 20% (Tauger 1991, 71). Tauger directly challenges the argument of Conquest and others, claiming that the 1932 grain procurement quota, and the amount of grain actually collected, were both much smaller than those of any other year in the 1930s. The Central Committee lowered the grain procurement quota in a May 6 decree... from the 1931 quota of 22.4 million tons to 18.1 million tons... for a total procurement quota of 20.6 million tons (Tauger 1991, 71).

Furthermore, after the procurement campaign came up 10% short in 1932, grain and other agricultural products were apparently returned to the villages in the form of food products as well as forage, seed and provision loans. In 1932, about 5.76 million tons were eventually returned to Ukrainian rural farmers, which was more than in 1930 or 1931. Yet, it is clear from the millions dead that a famine still occurred. If over-burdensome government procurements were not the main cause of famine, what was? According to Tauger, it was actually a food availability decline, set off by a particularly bad harvest year. If the original numbers for harvest yields are correct, then enough grain should have been left to villagers to avert a famine. For example, in the Ukraine, a “procurement of 4.7 million tons from the 1932 harvest of 14.6 million tons would have left nearly 10 million tons;” this amount would have left between 450 to 500 kg of grain for each peasant of Ukraine’s rural population of approximately 22 million, more than enough to ward off starvation (Tauger 1991, 74).

This discrepancy indicates that the actual harvest yield must have been much lower than reported. Tauger cites S.G. Wheatcroft, R.W. Davies, and J.M. Cooper, amongst others, who conclude that there was a “decline in grain production in 1931 and 1932, and...recovery in 1933 and 1934,” and that the crop in 1932 was actually between 55.7 million and 61.1 million tons, as opposed to the figure of 66.4 that Dalrymple cites (Tauger 1991, 75). According to Tauger, the decline in the 1932 harvest and the resulting food availability decline, was the result of “a series of economic, organizational, and political factors” including collectivization and a particularly severe drought (Tauger 1991, 84). In summary, the following graph shows a comparison, in percentage terms, between Dalrymple (Series 1) and Tauger’s (Series 2) data for the level of procurement quota levied on each year’s harvest (extrapolated from data in both articles). The comparison illustrates Dalrymple’s argument that procurement quotas increased as a percentage of the total harvest yield during the famine years, in contrast with Tauger’s argument that procurement quotas decreased during the famine. Tauger also contests Dalrymple’s argument that production remained stable during the famine; rather, he argues that harvest yields fell.

Amartya Sen cites two different contending arguments for the cause of famine. He dismisses the food availability

## Entitlement to Eat: Explaining the Ukraine Famine of 1932-1933

Written by Alex Stark

decline model as over-simplistic. For him, the litmus test is whether or not there has been a decline relative to population in food production from year to year: if production has not declined, there has been no food availability decline, and therefore the famine must be due to entitlement loss rather than an overall decline in the availability of food itself. In the case of the Ukraine famine, it is nearly impossible to make out whether there was actually a food availability decline or not, because the Soviet government probably distorted the figures to hide the truth about the famine itself. Every scholar agrees that there was a food availability decline to a certain extent, and all agree that the politics of collectivization and ensuing disorganization was the cause of a food availability decline. According to Tauger the harvest yield decline, caused both by collectivization and by a particularly severe drought, was severe enough to cause the famine. On the other hand, according to Conquest and others, the harvest yield decline was not severe enough to cause an out-and-out mass starvation so much as a mild increase in hunger. According to them, it was the procurement system that caused the famine.

Thus, in a way, a food availability decline did take place in that the Soviet government removed food from the rural areas. However, this was not a true food availability decline in that the problem was not in the yield of the harvest itself, but rather in how it was distributed afterwards. Furthermore, Conquest et al claim that Tauger's belief that the food availability decline was caused in part by drought is false. For example, the Report to the United States Congress of 1988 entitled "Investigation of the Ukraine Famine 1932-1933" argues that the idea that drought contributed to the famine is false. According to the report, "Soviet historical meteorologists have never found such a drought. There were droughts in 1931 and 1934 but not in 1932" (Mace, et al, 1988, x).

Furthermore, it is important to examine *who* exactly starved. The report states that in the same time period, the Soviet response to grain shortages induced by droughts outside of the Ukraine was to adjust down grain procurement quotas and mobilize at least some grain resource. We know that in these regions, even when there was a drought, there was no famine during this period, even if there was widespread hunger, because Stalin allowed food aid to be sent to the Middle and Lower Volga, the Southern Urals, Western Siberia and Kazakhstan (Mace, et al, 1988, xi-xii). Miron Dolot's eyewitness account of the famine also implies that the food availability decline approach does not apply here. Dolot, who lived through the Holodomar, recounts that "during the harvest of 1930 and 1931, the government used the newly organized collective farms to expropriate as much of the grain and other agricultural products as it wanted. There was talk in our village that more than three quarters of the total crop of 1931 had been taken by the government" (Dolot 1985, 91). Finally we know, as discussed earlier, that there was enough food to give Soviet officials in the area bountiful rations. This contrast in who exactly starved and who did not indicates that the famine was indeed the direct result of procurement quota and allocation policies. Thus, although there was a slight food availability decline in the Ukraine at the time of the famine, it is not sufficient to explain the causes of the Ukraine famine.

Conquest and Dalrymple's theory, that the famine was caused by a deliberately harsh Soviet procurement policy, therefore seems to be the most correct. Yet this theory does not fit into the food entitlement approach laid out by Sen. According to Sen, the entitlement approach "concentrates on the ability of people to command food through the legal means available in the society" (Sen 1981, 45). According to Sen, there are two ways that an individual can command access to food: direct entitlements, and indirect or exchange entitlements. A direct entitlement is made up of all of the food that an individual produces directly. Exchange entitlements are constituted of food that is acquired through trade, usually when an individual trades his or her labor for a wage, which can in turn be used to purchase food. Sen's theory argues that famine occurs when a group of individuals' entitlements decrease such that they cannot command enough food to survive. Usually this occurs even when there is still enough food being produced to feed everyone. Famines also are most likely to occur when an individual's exchange entitlement decreases, since in Sen's model a change in direct entitlements is not likely to be experienced simultaneously by a large group of people at once, although this is precisely what happened before the 1921 and 1932 famines. In Sen's model, this happens when the price of food increases much more quickly than the wages that laborers earn.

Sen's model does not really tell us anything useful about the Ukraine famine because there was no real change in the direct or exchange entitlements of peasants, due to the characteristics of the Soviet economic system. According to Conquest's account, the system of ownership of peasant land was converted just before the famine, from individual ownership to collective ownership. This represented an approximate shift from a direct to an exchange entitlement to

# Entitlement to Eat: Explaining the Ukraine Famine of 1932-1933

Written by Alex Stark

food, since peasants could no longer control their own production. However, no peasant had an exchange entitlement in the literal sense that Sen uses in his model, because there was no market economic system, peasants were not allowed to trade sell their crops and wage labor was officially banned.

The flaw in Sen's model with regards to the Ukrainian Famine is two-fold: it does not account for the fact that no capitalist market system existed, and it does not account for the arbitrary changes in law brought about by government policy. The first flaw, regarding a lack of trade, explains why no exchange entitlements existed and therefore why the famine could not have occurred because of a decline in exchange entitlement, as Sen's theory would point to. The second flaw, that of changes in the law, gets closer to the heart of why Sen's theory does not explain the causes of the Ukraine Famine. Sen defines a direct entitlement as an individual's access to the inputs of food production, like land, seeds, and so forth. The famine was caused by a change in government policy that meant that peasants were not legally entitled to the food that they themselves produced, that under a different political and legal system would have constituted a direct entitlement. Soviet policy in 1931-33 was to deliberately starve the Ukrainian peasants, by depriving them of the food that they produced, through the use of procurement quotas. Thus, although the peasants still had 'legal' access to the inputs of production, they were arbitrarily denied access to the food that they produced, depending upon how much the Soviet government decided to take from them. This also contributed to a food availability decline, because the incentive for peasants to produce had been destroyed.

The Ukraine famine ended in 1934, because in March 1933 the Soviet government began to lift the harsh procurement policies, halting grain collection and authorizing a seed subsidy for the next harvest. In May 1933, the government also engaged in a minimal amount of emergency aid, setting up some clinics and giving starving survivors some rations of bread, milk and porridge. These measures helped to bring the survivors back to working health, allowing them to pull in a large enough harvest in the next year to feed themselves (Conquest 1986, 262). Thus, it was a deliberate change in government policy, allowing peasants to resume legal access to the food that they produced, that ended the famine.

The evidence of the famine itself, taken together with the policy conditions of the late 1920's, when no famine occurred, and the resumption of these policy conditions after the famine, conclusively shows that the Ukraine Famine was not caused by either of Sen's dueling conceptions of the root cause of famine. The food availability decline approach is correct in that there was less food in the region than people needed to survive, but the food was removed after the harvest, not before due to natural conditions, so this approach does not entirely explain the root causes of the famine. Similarly, the food entitlement approach is correct in that peasants starved because they did not have access to the food being produced, but it was not because they lacked economic access; thus, this theory also does not comprehensively explain the root causes of the famine. The famine actually resulted from a third cause, one that we might term *political entitlement*. In the lead up to the famine, peasants did not experience a significant change in either direct or exchange entitlements. Rather, what actually changed was their political entitlement to food, or whether or not the government interfered legally in peasants' access to the food they themselves produced. Perhaps then the example of the 1932-1933 Ukraine Famine provides an example of a third approach to explaining the cause of famines, the of government policy and political entitlement.

## Works Cited

Conquest, Robert. *Harvest of Sorrows: Soviet collectivization and the terror-famine*. Oxford University Press: New York, 1986.

Dalrymple, Dana G. "The Soviet Famine of 1932-1934." Taylor & Francis, Ltd.: *Soviet Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (Jan., 1964), pp. 250-284. Accessed 02/25/2010, (<https://www.jstor.org/stable/149372>)

Dolot, Miron. *Execution by Hunger: the hidden holocaust*. W.W. Norton & Company: New York, 1985.

Mace, Dr. James E., Dr. Olga Samilenko and Walter Pechenuk. "Investigation of the Ukraine Famine 1932-1933," Report to Congress. Commission on the Ukraine Famine: Washington, DC, 1988.

Sen, Amartya. *Poverty and Famines: an essay on entitlement and deprivation*. Clarendon Press: New York, 1981.

## Entitlement to Eat: Explaining the Ukraine Famine of 1932-1933

Written by Alex Stark

Tauger, Mark. "The 1932 Harvest and the Famine of 1933." The American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies: *Slavic Review*, Vol. 50, No. 1, (Spring, 1991), pp. 70-89. Accessed 02/25/2010. (<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2500600>)

—

Written by: Alex Stark  
Written at: Wellesley College  
Written for: Professor Paarlberg  
Date: 2010

---

### About the author:

Alex Stark is an Editor-at-large of E-International Relations and a member of E-IR's Editorial board. She is a PhD student in International Relations at Georgetown University. She received her MSc in IR from the London School of Economics and BA from Wellesley College, where she was an Albright Fellow. Follow her on Twitter: @AlexMStark