Unintended Consequences: Communism and the Famine of 1921

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> "Three million hapless people are said to have started a blind migration hoping to find food, and typhus and cholera are raging. The richest agricultural regions have been hardest hit and the less favored ones, never entirely self-supporting, can barely exist on reduced rations. .... The blame for these conditions rests squarely on Communist policy..."[1]

In 1921, Russian agrarian lands buckled under tragic famine conditions, and five million people perished. Famine and starvation have frequently scourged other climes and times throughout history, the causes for which can be attributed to various natural, economic, and political circumstances. This particular famine, however, followed the Bolshevik Revolution, and thus, communism has been seen by some to be its attributing cause. However, while communism did not produce the famine in Russia, communist reforms exacerbated the severity of the famine. The narrative began with dreadful weather conditions, which effects were further intensified by hasty and poorly implemented governmental reforms accompanied by gross corruption. These events led to tragic unintended consequences, which were used to forever tarnish the reputation of communism.

[1] "The S.O.S. from Russia," *The Weekly Review*, August 20, 1921, 157.

Ninety years of hindsight allows us to look upon this event within its historical context. In the first two decades of the twentieth century, communism was gaining international popularity. The eyes of the world were fixed upon Russia to see what would become of her revolution. Communism was an idea borne out of critical anti-capitalistic sentiment, and worldwide battle lines were being drawn between sympathizers of the two camps. Entrenched pro-capitalist governments were fully aware of the threat that communism posed to their political and economic control. Campaign speeches, press reports, and diplomatic maneuvers were carefully tailored to highlight communism's shortcomings thereby casting their own system in a favorable light. Against this backdrop, the French *Journal des Debats* declared, "Russia is not suffering from drought but from Bolshevism."[2] Despite this popular rhetoric, however, chronological precedence does not insinuate cause, and therefore due diligence must be exercised to formulate a more comprehensive explanation for this famine.

In brief, examination of the agricultural specifics of this famine shows that the rural farming lands, which had hitherto fed a growing nation, suddenly became paralyzed. In the primary food-growing provinces, such the Black Earth region of the Volga River, pre-Revolutionary output had been 20 million tons of cereal grain annually. During this fertile time, only a fraction of this cereal was either required to feed the peasant producers or to be retained as seed for subsequent harvests. The remainder would be used to sustain the urban industrial workers or to be exported to neighboring countries to create national wealth. By 1920, just three years following the revolution, the output

[2] "Bolshevism's Harvest of Famine," *The Literary Digest*, August 20, 1921, 18.

dropped to 8.45 million tons and in 1921, to a pitiful 2.9 million tons.[3] These meager harvests threatened to starve their very own producers and provided little, if any, seed grain.

Conditions regressed so rapidly that survival depended upon scavenging for even the foulest sort of sustenance, the likes of which were never intended for modern human consumption. Emaciated peasants ingested caloric surrogates of tree bark, acorns, leaves, clay, and insects in an attempt to ease hunger pangs.[4] Russian peasant folklore revered the pigeon as an emblem of the Holy Spirit, but survival demanded its frequent consumption without regard to custom. Such harsh conditions even produced unconfirmed reports of cannibalism in the Orenburg district, incidents that seem probable given the harsh famine environment.[5] These drastic measures only delayed the deaths of the millions who would inevitably succumb to this tragedy.

Before we can delve into the specific causes of this catastrophe, we must first acknowledge the complex interdependency of a national economy. Economic meltdowns over the past one hundred years are usually traced back to just a single or handful of events that trigger the mass devastation. Each economic factor, such as low inflation, low interest rates, stable governance, consumer optimism, natural environments, infrastructure, etc., like many Roman columns, collectively hold the economy in prosperous suspension. It is possible that events cause one of these columns to be intentionally dismantled for the purposes of fortifiable restoration yet the overall structure remains due only to the fortitude of the others. However, this particular economic

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[3] Richard Pipes, *A Concise History of the Russian Revolution* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1995), 357.
[4] "Through Hungry Russia. Famine in a Ruined Land," *The Times*, September 13, 1921.
[5] "Through Hungry Russia. Food Trains for Moscow," *The Times*, September 17, 1921.

crisis appeared at an inopportune time when the integrity of all of Russia's columns was in question. The slightest disturbance, whether brought on by external factors or communist reforms, triggered a ruinous collapse that still echoes throughout history.

In light of this tragedy, it can be expedient to look upon the Bolsheviks and their shortcomings with an air of condemnation, but before communism is summarily pronounced guilty, a critical look at its own fundamental tenets is in order. A brief examination of pure communist policy is necessary to separate what was in fact communism and what were impromptu and hasty modifications implemented by this inexperienced government. To gather a general idea of communism's basics, both Marx and Lenin provide convenient ten-point outlines for nations striving to become communist in their *Communist Manifesto* and *April Theses,* respectively. In step six in the *Manifesto*, Marx called for the nationalization of the media and transport industries. This does play a role in the famine, but the effects of his other nine steps are negligible in regard to this Famine.[6] In regards to the *April Theses*, it is difficult to claim that a single one of Lenin's points as outlined directly contributed to the starvation of these millions. The bureaucracy of sole Soviet governance in step four is cause for blame, but in step five, Lenin concisely denounces the bureaucratic monster and calls for its abolishment. Step six, another key principle of this incendiary document, called for the "nationalization of all lands in the country, the land to be disposed of by the local Soviets of Agricultural Laborers' and Peasants' Deputies."[7] This platform was a significant reason for the rise in

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[6] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engles, *The Communist Manifesto* (New York: Pocket Books, 1964), 94.
[7] Vladimir Lenin, "April Theses, 1917," in *Europe in the Contemporary World*, ed. Bonnie Smith (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2007), 169.

Bolshevik popularity and subsequent political success. However, ease and boldness of declaration does not bring with it a guarantee of seamless implementation, and during the civil war of 1917-1923, the Russian agrarian society remained largely autonomous.[8] So if not for pure communist doctrine, other factors must have contributed to this famine.

Before carefully examining these other contributing factors, further examination of communism's supplementary contribution is necessary. Specifically, three policies were found to be among the many causes of this famine, the first of which is the nationalization of the transport and logistics systems. Famine relief efforts rely heavily upon industries like public transport and freight logistics. Public industries of this complexity can be of such fragility that the slightest tampering can result in ruinous collapse. The civil war brought compulsory changes to the industrial sectors causing them to produce only products that would prove useful for the Bolshevik war effort. This market manipulation quickly caused the maintenance yards of the transport industries to run dry of replacement parts to the extent that only 15% of the operating locomotives were being repaired. New production was also affected in that only 40 to 50 new engines were being produced annually compared to the pre-war average of 800 to 1,000.[9] At a time when one thousand engines laid idle due to unavailability of fuel, this neglect for upkeep brought a 75% reduction in total motive power.[10] Such a severe blow to these industries ensured inefficient and untimely allocation of grain stores and prevented starving masses from traveling to more fertile areas in their search for food.

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[8] Edward Hallett Carr, *The Russian Revolution* (New York: The Free Press, 1979), 22.
[9] "Bolshevik Confessions," *The Times*, June 3, 1920, 17.
[10] "Russia Can't Shift Her Food Supplies," *New York Times*, August 3, 1921, 2.

Communism's second contribution to this famine, although not mentioned in the previously referenced lists of Marx and Lenin, is the official foreign policy to proselytize communist doctrine in hopes of bringing about a world revolution. As news of peasant starvation reached Moscow, and as external assistance became the Bolshevik's only option, this commitment to spread the message of communism brazenly in western nations created quite a dilemma. While the Bolsheviks contemplated swallowing their pride to plead for help abroad, and as vindictive Western democracies shuffled their feet in debate over their responsibility for the relief efforts, millions continued to suffer and die as the full ramifications of this policy yielded deadly results. Lenin eventually capitulated and officially authorized Maxim Gorky, Russia's world-renowned author, to plead with wealthy nations for assistance. This aid was delivered but not without strings attached. The United States government demanded unconditional release of its Russian-held prisoners and direct distribution of its "capitalist" aid materials.[11] In Britain, a Parliamentary Committee demanded immediate renunciation of all Bolshevik propaganda on its soil.[12]

The final charge against communism for this famine is its requirement for the abolition of multi-party politics in favor of single party governance. Governments in countries with active and unadulterated dissent have a tendency to function optimally during a time of crisis because political opposition will strive to capitalize on the misfortunes and subsequent missteps of the incumbents. As the Bolsheviks had just violently rid the country of its political opponents, there remained no unifying voice of criticism among the masses. This

[11] "Russia Can't Shift Her Food Supplies," *New York Times*, August 3, 1921, 2.
[12] "Ruined Russia. Helpless Without Foreign Aid," *The Times*, May 5, 1921, 11.

now autonomous government was at liberty to neither regard the best interest of the people nor exercise initiative in generating rapid solutions for this widespread crisis.[13]

Having acknowledged communism's role, let us now move to address the natural causes of this famine. Russian agriculture was prone to a cyclical devastating weather pattern and in fact experienced a similar drought and subsequent famine in 1891-92. As other economic factors remained relatively stable at that time, starvation and disease claimed only a tenth of the casualties then that of the famine of 1921. Its harvest only dipped to thirteen percent below normal output, which allowed for agricultural production to quickly return to normal.[14] The 1921 drought, however, did not come during a period of economic stability, and its untimely arrival yielded crushing results.

Compounding the effects of devastating weather, political and economic ideologies external to Russia also played a role in this 1921 famine. Russia was only three years removed from the economic and spirit-crushing devastation of the Great War, a conflict primarily wrought by the culminating competiveness of European imperialism.[15] In Russia alone, this war yielded 1.3 million fatalities and 3.9 million war prisoners.[16] Just a few decades before this famine, sudden implementation of Western European-style capitalism enticed millions to seek their fortunes in the great cities of Petrograd and Moscow, forever disrupting the stable agrarian tradition.[17] These manufacturing sector employees now became wholly reliant upon the fragile public logistical

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[13] "Through Hungry Russia. Food Trains for Moscow," *The Times*, September 17, 1921.
[14] Pipes, *A Concise History of the Russian Revolution*, 357.
[15] H. G. Wells, "Russia in the Shadow," *New York Times*, November 7, 1920.
[16] Pipes, *A Concise History of the Russian Revolution*, 124.
[17] H. G. Wells, "Russia in the Shadow," *New York Times*, November 7, 1920.

systems to provide them with their sustenance. When the Bolsheviks seized power in 1917, this capitalist system was nowhere near maturity, and many new, immediate concerns impeded the new government from quickly addressing its shortcomings.

Between 1918 and 1921, violent counter-revolutionary movements formed to oppose the fledgling communist government. These inexperienced leaders had no script on how to wage an internal political war while simultaneously dismantling and rebuilding an entire national economic structure. They were compelled to implement policies known as War Communism out of impromptu necessity. One of War Communism's central tenets was the hasty and rather sloppy nationalization of the means of production and transport.[18] Of course, this also included isolated accounts of agricultural production, and it soon became common practice for Red Army officials to seize the output of the peasantry along strategic routes. However, even well after the Bolsheviks had solidified their victory in the civil war, the Red Army continued its banditry "brutally and without regard to the needs and supplies of the peasants."[19] This violent requisitioning was necessary as the troops were unable to feed themselves in the service of a financially ruined government.

Lacking a broad oversight administration, the government failed to control the extent of this plundering, which threatened the survival of both soldiers and peasants. For basic sustenance and seed corn, each peasant required approximately five hundred pounds of grain annually.[20] In the case of one particular farmer, the army seized eighty percent of his roughly eleven-thousand-pound harvest, which left little else for him to

[18] Pipes, *A Concise History of the Russian Revolution*, 193.
[19] "Through Hungry Russia. Volga Famine Horror," *The Times*, September 17, 1921.
[20] Pipes, *A Concise History of the Russian Revolution*, 357.

feed his loved ones or sell and trade for other necessities.[21] The term "War Communism" may imply that it was a necessary supplement to communism, but rather it led to the creation of yet another oppressive class, this one of armed and official bandits who robbed, exploited, and starved the very people that the revolution had intended to liberate.

A necessary condition for the existence and effectiveness of a large communist bureaucracy is tax revenues. Every type of government must rely upon tax revenues to some degree, but when building a communist bureaucracy from scratch, it is vital to tax at relatively high levels. When initially calculating these potential revenues, the government assumed—albeit erroneously—an economic status quo and in one particular case levied a tax upon the pre-revolutionary industrialists. This particular band of bourgeoisie (the targets of the revolution) drastically adjusted their production levels to minimize their tax burdens, and the tax yielded only one ten-thousandth of the amount estimated. The burden of revenue now fell upon rural Soviets, and they began levying their own taxes upon the members of their peasant communities. Starting in 1918, these "in kind" taxes collected vast amounts of excess agricultural production. Once again, poor oversight of this vast and largely autonomous bureaucracy enabled local officials to seize so much that it began to threaten the livelihood of the producers and their ability to grow subsequent harvests.[22] Implementation inefficiencies and economic experimentation, although orchestrated by the Bolsheviks, are not hard and fast rules of communism. The famine therefore, cannot be directly attributed to communism, per se, but rather to its clumsily implemented and arguably unnecessary byproducts.

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[21] "Through Hungry Russia. Volga Famine Horror," *The Times*, September 17, 1921.
[22] "Conditions in Russia," *The Economist*, March 1, 1919, 367.

Another contributor to this famine was gross administrative incompetency. Mid-level Soviet officials and Bolshevik newspapers demonstrated consistently irresolute positions regarding the famine realities. Political expediency caused greenhorn party members to exaggerate the extent of the famine while others sought to cover up the agricultural failures and death tolls of their provinces in fear of retribution.[23] These inconsistent reports confused the decision makers in the central government, which brought further delay to the remedies. Although many other causes could be presented, such as the existence of the black market, uncontrollable inflation, and the collapse of the industrial segment, the final cause worthy of mention is the bureaucratic corruption of the Soviets. Opportunistic officials frequently abused their powers of office through speculation or profiteering. A certain Moscow Soviet was confirmed to have levied an illegal tax upon its bourgeoisie residents. They then internally redistributed the proceeds and thereby subsidized idle party loyalists.[24] Other reports confirmed that devious Soviet officials actively sought assignments in the government distribution houses of foodstuffs and daily wares. These "Soviet Mice" comfortably survived the famine by pilfering their nation's only recourse against the devastation.[25] This corruption flourished due to lack of oversight, but such activity could not be further from communist policy. Once reprimanded, these thieves were given public death sentences or long prison terms.[26]

For 160 years, communism and capitalism have waged an epic battle of economic superiority, and in the present day it is obvious which

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[23] "Through Hungry Russia. Famine in a Ruined Land," *The Times*, September 13, 1921.
[24] "Conditions in Russia," *The Economist*, March 1, 1919, 367.
[25] "Through Hungry Russia. Food Trains for Moscow," *The Times*, September 17, 1921.
[26] "Through Hungry Russia. Food Trains for Moscow," *The Times*, September 17, 1921.

system has survived. History has also shown us, however, that victors can be prone to look upon their most bitter opponents with an air of criticism. It is acknowledged that communism played a role in this tragedy, but not as the sole cause. After presenting other important contributors to this famine, and despite implications levied against some of the most storied implements of western civilization, such as imperialism and capitalism, we are now left with a more robust understanding of this sad blight of history.

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