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Book Review: *Red Famine: Stalin's War on Ukraine*

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Red Famine: Stalin's War on Ukraine

Anne Applebaum

New York, Doubleday (Penguin Random House LLC), 2017

461 Pages; Price: \$35.00 Hardcover

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Red Famine is a book in which Anne Applebaum, winner of a Pulitzer Prize, focuses on the Soviet famine of the 1930s. For the author it was implemented in a planned and systematic way by Stalin against Ukraine artificially. It is the result of a history of submission from Russia to Ukraine that has its genesis in Tsarism, is accentuated after the Revolution in 1917 and culminates in 1933 with the process of artificial famine. The author starts from a hypothesis of first Russian, and then Soviet hostility towards Ukraine which is based on various historical sources and documents. The main questions that run through the book are: what happened between 1917 and 1934? What happened during 1932 and 1933? In addition, what place does famine occupy in the history of Ukraine and its national movement?

In order to answer these questions, the author makes a genealogical route of the relationship between Ukraine and Russia throughout history. In the first place, she stops at the peculiarities of Ukraine and its cultural and idiomatic differences with respect to its main neighbours, Poland and Russia, emphasizing that it is precisely those that constitute it as a different nation with its distinctive language and customs.

After this introduction she focuses on the Ukrainian Revolution of 1917 and its independence after the dissolution of the Russian Empire (chapter 1) and the civil war process (1918-1921) between the declared People's Republic of Ukraine and Soviet Russia (Chapters 2 and 3). Then she analyses the New State Policy of the Soviet Union in Ukraine during the 1920s (chapter 4), the process of collectivization of land in 1930 (chapter 5 and 6) and its failure in 1931 (chapter 7). Once the historical route is drawn, Applebaum stops in the process of planning the famine during 1932 (chapters 8, 9 and 10) and the famine during the spring and summer of 1933 (chapters 11 and 12). Finally, the author stops at the consequences of the famine (chapter 13), its cover-up by the Soviet government (chapter 14) and a set of conclusions about its current repercussions (chapter 15).

Starting from the idea that due to its nationalist and independence movement, Ukraine constituted a danger to the consolidation of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Applebaum questions the idea that famine was an unwanted effect of the process of collectivization of land and argues that Stalin's goal was planned by finding background since the 1920. These backgrounds were the persecution of intellectuals, members of traditional Ukrainian and nationalists, and then against the peasantry; mainly the rich peasants (kulaks) that in Stalin's eyes were the main representatives of Ukrainian nationalism and potential members of new revolutions.

The persecution of intellectuals, artists, and writers occurred mainly in the 1920s from arrests, murders, and the author points to it as a precedent of premeditated attack against the elite of the Ukrainian national culture. As a counterpoint, she argues that the famine of 1921 was the product of the first process of collectivization and delivery of crops and grains to the Soviet government since Stalin himself recognized it and international assistance was received to alleviate the effects of starvation. Not so during 1932 and 1933: Applebaum argues that neither collectivization, neither bad crops nor the weather caused famine in Ukraine. The collectivization was an initial kick to give the conditions that led to it but were not a direct consequence of it. Applebaum affirms that it was a planned situation that occurred as a result of the systematic seizure of food from peasant households, accompanied by the cutting of routes that they prevented farmers from finding food

(this did not happen in the famine of the 1920s), the development of blacklists in villages and restrictions on trade.

As in every genocide, Applebaum argues that Stalin did not aim to annihilate all Ukrainians but a portion of the national group. For the author, the goal of hunger annihilation was the most active and committed Ukrainians with the nationalist project. She starts from this premise by taking Raphael Lemkin and criticizing the purely legal and moral uses of the term genocide: she proposes it as a category of historical use from which the Ukrainian case can be understood even though at the moment of the perpetration of the genocide this category did not exist. The author claims that the almost four million Ukrainian victims were the result of a deliberate famine that was part of a systematic plan for political purposes to destroy the Ukrainian identity that put Soviet aspirations at risk.

Applebaum argues that this fact continues until today and crosses contemporary political conflicts between Ukraine and Russia. The author asserts that the main tensions are in the official political discourse and are influenced by the presidents' ties with the communist party. In 2004, President Viktor Yuschenko politicized the debate on the facts by arguing that the events were a matter of genocide; Yuschenko was the first president who had not been a member of the party. The official speech changed radically by assuming Yanukovych, who reversed this debate about the responsibility of the famine, for being a pro-Russian ruler. Currently the dispute exceeded the official political discourse and reached on the one hand, the Russian speaking Ukrainian society, and on the other, the Ukrainian speaking society, which the first accuse of carrying out a cultural genocide against the part of the population of non-Ukrainian speakers. Russian speakers deny the planned famine while Ukrainian speakers hold it and denounce its denial.

Finally, Applebaum asserts that the silencing and denial of the Soviet genocide against the Ukrainian people continues to shape the way in which Ukrainians and Russians think about themselves and each other. In this sense, she links the current political problems of Ukraine, such as distrust of the State and political corruption with the loss of the political and academic elite as a result of the genocide. For her, all these problems must go back to 1933, even if they are current.