

An Investigation of Intent and Genocide in the 1930s Kazakh Famine

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Abstract: In the 1930s, Kazakhstan, then a republic of the Soviet Union, experienced a devastating famine, resulting in the deaths of 1.5 million people. It is widely accepted that this famine occurred due to the Soviet Union's forced collectivization and sedentarization campaigns. This article summarizes the famine's causes and consequences to use the existing legal definition of intent to critically evaluate Stalin's mindset at the time of the famine. This summary is used to conclude that the famine was likely an intentional act of violence. Further, with this establishment of intent in mind, this article uses the United Nations' definition of genocide to consider whether the horrors endured by and inflicted upon the Kazakh people constitute a genocide. Using the same framework as the legal evaluation of intent, the article concludes that the Great Famine in Kazakhstan cannot be legally classified as a genocide.

The various crimes committed by the Soviet Union are well-documented in the West: from the Katyn massacre, in which thousands of Polish military personnel were executed during World War II; to the Gulag system, composed of forced labor camps housing criminals and political prisoners, where over a million died. Seldom discussed, however, is the Great Famine of the early 1930s, specifically in Kazakhstan. Until as recently as 2018, little research on the subject was available, and it is still not widely discussed in Kazakhstan itself (Cameron, 2018a). Central to the Soviet Union's goal of industrialization in the years leading up to the famine were collectivization, or the requisition of livestock and grain from Kazakhstan's entire population and the

creation of collective state-owned farms, and sedentarization, or the settling of nomadic populations. As a result of these campaigns, nearly a quarter of the Kazakh population and a third of all ethnic Kazakhs were either starved to death or executed. An analysis of the conditions in which collectivization and sedentarization policies were implemented, as well as the Soviet Union's struggle with nomadism and the peasantry, reveals that the Kazakh famine of the 1930s could be considered both an intentional act and one of genocide.

The Kazakh government only recently began to acknowledge the 1930s famine, seeing as Kazakhstan was hesitant to paint the Soviet Union, and consequently Russia, in

a negative light (Cameron, 2018a). As a result, when one studies the topic, the same works are frequently cited: Niccolò Pianciola's 2001 account "The Collectivization Famine in Kazakhstan, 1931-33," Sarah Cameron's 2018 book *In the Hungry Steppe*, the first book to include Kazakh language resources, and Robert Kindler's *Stalin's Nomads*, also published in 2018 (Hancock-Parmer, 2019, p. 603). These publications primarily report on the famine's history, and speculations as to whether the famine was intentional or of its possible classification as genocide are limited to a few paragraphs (Cameron, 2018b, p. 14, 178). This paper aims to fill this gap by both providing a brief account of the famine and using the available information coupled with legal definitions to investigate claims of intention and genocide.

Famine

In the years between the Bolshevik revolution, which marked the beginning of the Soviet Union, and the Great Famine, many Kazakhs were pastoral nomads, meaning they seasonally migrated to provide their livestock with adequate pasturage (Cameron, 2018b, p. 19-20). A new state focused primarily on economic gain by way of industrialization, the Soviet Union viewed pastoral nomadism as an inefficient approach to agriculture and took steps to eliminate it (Cameron, 2018b, p. 47). The Soviet Union also considered nomadism at odds with nearly every aspect of modernization. Cameron writes, "a mobile way of life [was deemed] to be incompatible with the development of various features of 'contemporary culture,' such as schools, libraries, museums, telephones, telegraphs, electrification, a postal service, and the development of industry" (Cameron, 2018b, p. 66). Advocates against nomadic settlement in the region's warnings fell on deaf ears,

with various figures who came out in support of nomadism denounced as capitalists, arrested, or even killed (Cameron, 2018b, p. 64). As Pianciola said, locations for forced sedentarization were "chosen without verifying whether they could provide sustenance for animals or even whether there was potable water available for the people" and were extremely underfunded, resulting in many deaths due to disease and uninhabitable conditions (Pianciola, 2001, p. 241).

Nomadism was not the only aspect of Kazakh society that the Soviet Union sought to dismantle; Communist party officials also saw the structure of Kazakh society as a threat to Soviet rule for its traditional leadership and as a violation of Marxist principles for its distribution of property (Cameron, 2018b, p. 66-67). Kazakh society was organized into clans of pastoral nomads that migrated together (Kervin, 2021, p. 3). These clans were headed by *bais*, or the Kazakh kulak, wealthy peasants who owned the majority of a group's livestock and were consequently in positions of influence (Cameron, 2018b, p. 73-74). In this way, Kazakh society was classified as a class system similar to feudalism, though Cameron notes that "feudalism among nomads was largely based on a monopoly of cattle rather than a monopoly of land" (Cameron, 2018b, p. 67). Thus, the Soviets decided that to disrupt the influence of clans over the Kazakh people, the party needed to strip the *bais* of their livestock. A famine survivor recounts, "[t]he people of our auls [Kazakh for village] just had a vague idea about Lenin and Stalin; only a few Kazakhs had heard these names. But the Kazakhs experienced the real power of the Bolsheviks' bloody government when they were deprived of their whole livestock" (Nurzina, 2012, p. 116).

In August of 1928, an official confiscation campaign, known as debaiization, began (Cameron, 2018b, p. 70). As Kindler notes,

The [Soviet's] plan was to dispossess 'rich bais' and 'semifeudalists' and chase them and their entire families out of their homelands, and then to redistribute their possessions among the 'poor population' in an effort to counter the unequal wealth and alleged widespread exploitation (Kindler, 2018, p. 79).

Confiscation once again becoming official state policy signaled the reemergence of War Communism, namely its economic policy of forced grain requisition, which was the cause of Kazakhstan's previous famine in 1921 (Malabayev, 2021). Households in possession of a certain number of livestock, a number that varied with the district's degree of nomadic settlement, were categorized as rich bais (Cameron, 2018b, p. 90). Though strict criteria and quotas gave the campaign a sense of credibility, its instructions were unclear and allowed regional party members to interpret them as they wished (Cameron, 2018b, p. 91). One point of contention was what constituted a single household. A party official was quoted saying that all extended families belonged to one household, including "stepmothers, grownup sons, stepchildren, nephews, adopted children, and stepbrothers" (Cameron, 2018b, p. 91). A warning from a telegram written by the chairman of the republic's Council of People's Commissars reported that "there have been instances, where due to this approach forty-five to sixty people have been combined into one family, even though they have never met in their lives" (Cameron, 2018b, p. 91).

This misclassification of poor Kazakhs into bai households, and thus as bais, had

dire consequences. Officials met resistance to confiscation with extreme cruelty, and many people were tortured and even killed (Kindler, 2018b, p. 90-91). One Chekist, or member of the secret police, was even quoted saying, "[i]t seems to me that we will not establish Soviet power...without a good deal of bloodshed. The more bais we kill in the district, the better" (Kindler, 2018b, p. 90). In this way, Little October tested practices and set the tone for the forced collectivization campaign that would be applied to the entire population.

Following Stalin's frustration with the 1927-28 grain shortage brought on by the New Economic Policy's reliance on a free market, forced collectivization began in late 1929, which allowed the state to assume control over the production and supply of grain and meat (Cameron, 2018, p. 97; Kindler, 2018b, p. 68). Under intense pressure from Moscow, party officials hastily created plans for collectivization without properly considering the amount of grain Kazakhs consumed or the agricultural conditions of districts selected; numbers for quotas of grain and meat to be requisitioned were created without considering whether collective farmers could fulfill them, and herd sizes were estimated without seeing a single animal (Cameron, 2018b, p. 104; Kindler, 2018, p. 73). Higher-ranking Soviet officials often left their local counterparts in the dark on purpose to "reconcile their disassociation through a particularly harsh treatment of peasants and nomads" (Kindler, 2018, p. 95). Activists, or those in charge of carrying out collectivization, would beat or shoot members of collective farms at will and throw them out in the middle of winter half-dressed, leaving them to freeze or starve to death. As an official in the Karkaralinsk district put it, "[o]n entering the kolkhoz [collective farm], an ordinary collective farm

member gives over everything, and he is only left the right to work steadily and starve" (Cameron, 2018b, p. 105).

Those who failed to fulfill quotas were terrorized. Kindler notes, "officials beat men and women, drenched women in cold water, raped them, and then gathered for uninhibited carousing. They took men out...and tortured them with mock executions" (Kindler, 2018, p. 90). Once forcefully requisitioned, the Soviet Union exchanged grain for hard currency abroad, and both grain and meat were sent from the countryside to industrialized areas of the Soviet Union to feed workers (Cameron, 2018b, p. 97).

Aside from grain and meat requisition, collectivization also included forcing farmers to join state-owned collective farms to increase agricultural production. The speed at which collectivization took place, however, meant that no official bothered to check the conditions of the collective farms rapidly forming in the republic (Kindler, 2018b, p. 94). Collective farms were often composed of Kazakhs inexperienced with growing grain yet still given high quotas, leaving Kazakhs with no other choice but to purchase grain by selling livestock (Cameron, 2018b, p. 13).

There came the point, however, where there was little livestock to sell (Kindler, 2018, p. 100). There are many reasons Kazakhstan's livestock population decreased drastically leading up to and during the famine: many herdsmen preferred to slaughter their animals rather than hand them over, and when animals were successfully confiscated, Communist party officials often did not know what to do with them (Kindler, 2018, p. 103-105). A lack of planning meant too few winter stables were built to house livestock, resulting in mass animal deaths and slaughters to avoid an

outbreak of disease (Cameron, 2018b, p. 108). Rather than preserve the meat, the carcasses were left to rot (Cameron, 2018b, p. 109). Meanwhile, nomads were prosecuted for slaughtering their own animals for food or attempting seasonal migrations (Cameron, 2018b, p. 110). In the end, approximately 90% of Kazakhstan's livestock population died (Kindler, 2018, p. 101). By the summer of 1930, regions of Kazakhstan had begun to starve (Cameron, 2018b, p. 99).

The famine itself had devastating consequences for the Kazakh people. Many took to roaming the republic and fleeing to other countries in search of food (Cameron, 2018b, p. 143). It became commonplace for dead bodies to lay in the streets for days (Cameron, 2018b, p. 1, 16). Over 1.5 million rural Kazakhs would end up fleeing the republic (Pianciola, 2001, p. 242). Families would seek shelter in "railway stations, abandoned buildings, and churches," and these refugee encampments became breeding grounds for a variety of deadly diseases such as "typhus, smallpox, tuberculosis, and cholera" (Cameron, 2018b, p. 147). Kazakh refugees, referred to as *otkochevniki* (Russian: "population on the move"), were vilified and looked down upon by the rest of Soviet society (Cameron, 2018b, p. 144, 149). With famine comes an increase in crime and cannibalism, but the starving themselves, rather than the collectivization that brought them to that point, were faulted for this behavior (Cameron, 2018b, p. 149). Kazakhstan's party secretary even went so far as to publicly push for an increase in "the most brutal forms of punishment, including shooting" against *otkochevniki* (Cameron, 2018b, p. 162). This cruel indifference to Kazakh suffering also extended outside of the republic. When a crowd of 800 starving Kazakhs gathered at a train station in Kyrgyzstan in the hopes of

receiving help, the Kyrgyz government asked that the Soviet Union send the refugees back to Kazakhstan and left them there to die (Cameron, 2018b, p. 164).

Due to hunger, murder, and disease, at least 1.5 million people died in the 1930s famine (Cameron, 2018b, p. 2). The death toll disproportionately affected ethnic Kazakhs: before the famine, Kazakhs composed 60% of the population, yet they accounted for over 90% of famine-related deaths (Cameron, 2018b, p. 5). Over a million ethnic Kazakhs died, 40% of all Kazakhs in the republic, effectively making Kazakhs a minority in their own state (Cameron, 2018b, p. 5). They would not cease to be a minority until after the dissolution of the Soviet Union (Cameron, 2018b, p. 2).

Intent

The potential causes of famine, as stated by the American Association for the Advancement of Science, are crop failure and governmental policy, and it is stated that "seldom does famine arise from a single bad growing season" (Mellor and Gavin, 1987, p. 541). While a bad harvest did contribute to the famine in Kazakhstan, the Soviet Union's collectivization policy undoubtedly exacerbated the situation. As Sartabyeva notes, "the cause of [the] famine was largely political even though there were natural (harsh winter conditions in Kazakhstan) factors...famine and associated hardship were deliberate political actions" (Sartbayeva, 2019, p. 231). After failed harvests in 1931 and 1932, the Soviet Union continued to export grain out of the Republic. Hiroaki Kuromiya writes, "if the Soviet government had been willing to accept external aid or shifted trade priority, the famine could have been averted or would have been much more limited in nature" (Kuromiya, 2008, p. 663). In this way, the

Great Famine in Kazakhstan was a direct result of Soviet political policy and action.

While the Soviet Union's responsibility is widely acknowledged among scholars, Stalin's intentions regarding the famine are still subject to debate: did Stalin intend to cause the Kazakh famine of the 1930s, or was it the product of abhorrent neglect? Intent, which is an ambiguous term in and of itself, has been legally defined by the House of Lords regarding murder as follows:

First, was death... a natural consequence of the defendant's voluntary act? Second, did the defendant foresee that consequence as being a natural consequence of his act? The jury should then be told that if they answer yes to both questions, it is a proper inference for them to draw that he intended that consequence (Ellman, 2007, p. 681).

Ellman notes that this definition of intent is well-suited for analysis because it is reflective of "current legal thinking on this issue" (Ellman, 2007, p. 681). As such, it will be used in the forthcoming analysis.

According to this definition of intent, the case for Stalin unintentionally causing the Kazakh famine relies on the assumption that he was oblivious to the consequences of his brutal policies. Given that grain procurement previously caused a famine in the Soviet Union in 1921 during the Russian Civil War, it should have come as no surprise that it could do so again (Malabayev, 2021). What's more, in 1922, the Soviet Union received aid from Friends of Soviet Russia, an organization in the United States whose primary aim was to "stand...for the relief of the men, women, and children who are still in need of food [in Soviet Russia]," indicating

that this famine was known throughout the world (Friends of Soviet Russia, 1922a, p. 1-4; Friends of Soviet Russia, 1922b, p. 1). For Stalin to have been unaware of the consequences of forced grain requisition, especially on the heels of two consecutive failed harvests, he would have had to have no knowledge of this period of his country's history. Moreover, Cameron notes,

Stalin received news of Kazakhs' suffering at several crucial points, in late 1930 with the first onset of hunger; in January 1931 as the second collectivization drive began; and again in late 1932 during the height of the Kazakh refugee crisis (Cameron, 2018b, p. 14).

This means that not only should Stalin have been aware of grain requisition's ability to cause or exacerbate famine but that he continued to implement the policy after being explicitly alerted to the republic's starvation. To quote Ellman again, "Stalin was undoubtedly ignorant about many things, but was he really that ignorant?" (Ellman, 2007, p. 681). Is one truly to believe he did not think his actions would result in mass death?

Further, Stalin was frequently guilty of accusations in mirror, meaning he accused others of the things he did (Ellman, 2010, p. 825, 826). He was guilty of it when he accused the Nazis of carrying out the Katyn massacre, and he may have been guilty of it during the Kazakh famine, seeing as he was quoted saying, "[t]he fact that the sabotage [workers strike] was apparently harmless (bloodless) does not alter the fact that the esteemed grain growers were basically waging a 'quiet' war against Soviet power. A war by starvation" (Ellman, 2010, p. 824). As Ellman observes, this piece of correspondence reveals that "the first person to accuse people of deliberately starving

other people was Stalin himself—not his various later critics" (Ellman, 2010, p. 824). Put into the context of Stalin's past with accusations in mirror, it indicates he may have been projecting responsibility for the famine onto its victims.

The idea that Stalin did intend for people to die as a result of the famine is corroborated by Hiroaki Kuromiya in their article "The Soviet Famine of 1932-1933 Reconsidered." However, Kuromiya claims that "circumstantial evidence...suggests that it is not likely that Stalin intended to kill millions" (Kuromiya, 2008, p. 665). Grain procurement quotas for Kazakhstan and other Soviet republics affected by the Great Famine were reduced in 1932 and 1933, and the Soviet Union even went so far as to "clandestinely purchase...grain abroad to feed the hungry nation" (Kuromiya, 2008, p. 666). While this did next to nothing to prevent or mitigate the famine, these actions do show that perhaps Stalin did not intend for a death toll of the magnitude that occurred (Kuromiya, 2008, p. 666).

Genocide

This discussion regarding Stalin's intentions does not exist to justify his actions but rather to attempt to convict him of the crime of crimes: genocide. The United Nations' definition of genocide, the first to structure the crime in terms of international law, is as follows:

Genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial, or religious group, as such: (a) Killing members of the group; (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated

to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group (United Nations, 1948).

As is evidenced by brutal forced collectivization and sedentarization policies, Stalin's decision to continue exporting grain out of Kazakhstan during a famine, and the sheer number of deaths, did both kill and cause serious bodily or mental harm to Kazakhs. This satisfies both parts (a) and (b) of the definition, respectively. Further, there is a case to be made for part (c) of the definition, namely intentionally imposing living conditions on the group meant to destroy it in whole or in part, given that collectivization continued after it was well-established that people were dying from it (Kuromiya, 2008, pp. 665). With all this in mind, there is little doubt that Stalin's acts match those described in the definition. It is the requirement that the crime is committed with the aim of exterminating a specific national or ethnic group, however, that Stalin fails to meet.

The Kazakh people were not the only victims of Stalin's horrific crimes. Soviet-imposed collectivization also continued in Ukraine once it became clear that it led to starvation, and borders were also closed there to prevent starving people from fleeing (Pianciola, 2018, p. 442). These similarities weaken the case for the extermination of a specific ethnicity and point rather to the extermination, in part, of the peasantry or a certain class when they conflicted with the Soviet Union politically. As Cameron states, the tactics used by the Soviet Union that worsened the famine "were directed at resolving issues the regime perceived to be political problems" (Cameron, 2018b, p. 178). Here, it must be noted that the United

Nations' definition of genocide does not include political groups because the Soviet Union, a member of the United Nations at the time, and other members lobbied against it (Cameron, 2018b, p. 178). An examination of the similarities between the experiences of Kazakhstan and Ukraine, namely how, in both cases, deadly collectivization was targeted at peasants reluctant to comply with the Soviet Union's demands, reveals why it may have been in their interest to do so.

However, a lack of evidence indicating intent to exterminate Kazakhs in whole or in part does not mean that it never existed. While there is a need for more evidence to support the claim that the Kazakh famine was a genocide in the court of law, historians and political scientists are not limited to that level of proof. A criminal, by nature, evades punishment, and as such, Stalin would have done his best to ensure evidence of genocidal intent does not exist. On the role of intent in the classification of a crime against humanity as genocide, the following has been written:

Intentions are supremely important in the world's grim record of genocide—but not because they are recorded as "intent to destroy." They matter least where they look like the legally decisive smoking gun. They matter most because of all the ways they are disguised. Intentions were disguised by the perpetrators of atrocities to make sure they were not called to account ("Three Responses," 2008, p. 112).

Historical understanding exists in a different realm than the legal standards for proof, which allows for the idea of a genocide committed by neglect—the failure to protect one's people from one's own policies, for example.

Moreover, when one researches the history of the term genocide itself, namely its conception, a more general definition, sans the United Nations' emphasis on ethnic, national, racial, and religious groups, presents itself. The word genocide was originally coined by Raphael Lemkin, a Jewish lawyer, in 1944. He frequently argued against a narrow definition of his term, saying,

Genocide does not mean the immediate destruction of a nation, except when accomplished by mass killings of all members of a nation. It is intended rather to signify a coordinated plan of different actions aiming at the destruction of essential foundations of the life of national groups, with the aim of annihilating the groups themselves (Shaw, 2015, p. 16).

Under this more general definition, the collectivization and sedentarization campaigns that killed peasants across the Soviet Union could be considered a genocide. By way of confiscating livestock, criminalizing migration, and forcing them to settle in environments ill-suited for inhabitation, the Soviet Union sought to eliminate, in part, the group of people they viewed as a barrier to industrialization.

Conclusion

This article argues that the Great Famine in Kazakhstan occurred as a direct result of the Soviet Union's sedentarization and collectivization policies. Had the Kazakh population not been forced to give up their grain and livestock, the famine would not

have resulted in anywhere near its recorded number of casualties. Beyond being responsible for the deaths of 1.5 million Kazakhs, it also asserts that the famine was likely an intentional act of violence aimed at killing part of the Kazakh population. However, this intention is not enough to categorize the famine as genocide in the legal sense. The United Nations' definition of genocide requires that the crime be committed with the intention of ending a racial, ethnic, national, or religious group. Similarities between the famine in Kazakhstan and that in Ukraine reveal that the target of the famine was a class of society rather than a cultural group. In this way, the famine cannot be considered a genocide under the United Nations' definition.

It is important to note that the word genocide is not necessary to properly condemn the Soviet Union for its horrific actions. Regardless of whether the Great Famine of the 1930s in Kazakhstan can be considered a genocide, it remains an atrocity; a lack of evidence to convict Stalin of genocide does not absolve him of responsibility for over a million deaths. As Pianciola said, "[d]riven by communist ideology and a readiness to kill millions, Stalin built a system of domination that was much more exploitative, oppressive and murderous than other regimes that instead unquestionably targeted ethnic groups for extermination...we do not need the label 'genocide' for maximum political and moral denunciation" (Pianciola, 2018, p. 443). The Soviet Union was determined to industrialize Kazakhstan's republic at all costs, and the Kazakh population was forced to pay the price with their blood.

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