The Soviet assault on the peasantry, and on the Ukrainian nation, in 1930-1933 was one of the largest and most devastating events in modern history. It was a tremendous human tragedy—with many more dead than in all countries together in World War I. It was a major economic disaster. And it was a social "revolution from above," as Stalin put it, which wholly transformed a major country.

Yet these events have not to this day been fully registered in Western consciousness. There is a general knowledge here that some sort of catastrophe struck, or may have struck, the Soviet countryside, but little more. This minimum has percolated over the decades, from eyewitnesses and victims; and more recently from the fact that almost every work by the many talented Soviet writers who have come (or whose unofficial writings have come) to the West has at least a passing reference to the rural terror and its hideous consequences, taking for granted events which to them are part of a known background.

But the events are both complex and unfamiliar to westerners. The very concept of a peasant is strange to American and British ears. The Ukrainian nationality, subjugated to be merely part of the Russian Empire for a century and a half, enjoying only a few years of precarious and interrupted independence after the revolution, and then again becoming merely part of the USSR, does not declare itself to the Western observer as the Polish or even the Latvian nations are able to. Even the Communist Party, its ideology and its motivations, is for us an alien and not easily understood phenomenon.

The facts of the assault on the peasantry, and on the Ukrainian nationality, are complex. Essentially, it was a threefold blow. Dekulakization meant the deportation of millions of peasants. Collectivization meant the herding of the rest of them into collective farms. And in 1932-1933, the collectivized peasantry of the Ukraine and adjacent regions was crushed in a special operation by the seizure of the whole grain crop and the starvation of the villages. We see no single, and simply describable and assimilable event, but a complicated sequence.

Most important of all, a great effort was put into denying or concealing the facts. Right from the start, when the truth came out from a variety of sources, the Stalinist assertion of a different story confused the issue: and some Western journalists and scholars were duped or suborned into supporting the Stalinist version. Nor have the Soviet authorities yet admitted the facts. A recent novel published in the USSR briefly describes the terror-famine, and later notes "in not a single textbook in contemporary history will you find the merest reference to 1933, the year marked by a terrible tragedy."

Lenin had devised, for a Marxist analysis of village life, a division of the peasantry into "kulaks," "middle peasants," and "poor peasants" plus a "village proletariat." This implied a "class struggle" in the village which in fact failed to occur, but was thereupon imposed by the representative of the cities. The most lethal invention was the "kulak." This word -- "fist" -- had in reality been used to label a very small class of village moneylenders, all of whom had disappeared by 1918. Lenin transferred it to the richer peasantry. These too were wiped out by 1920. The term was then used of the more prosperous survivors.

From 1918 the attempt was made to abolish the market, and get grain by forced requisition. By 1921, peasant resistance, expressed in widespread -- indeed almost universal -- peasant risings
had brought the regime to the point of collapse and Lenin, with the "New Economic Policy," (NEP), restored the market system. The ruined peasants, who then worked indefatigably to restore their fortunes, thereby saved the country: but the more they prospered, the more they were regarded as "kulaks" by Party ideologists.

The Party hated the kulak as the main obstacle to socialism. In reality, as is often admitted in party literature, the middle peasants and even the poor peasants almost always took the same line. But party doctrine required a "class enemy." No actual definition of the kulak was ever made: or rather a number of contradicting definitions appeared.

After the peasantry had restored the economy, Stalin felt strong enough to strike at the kulak. During the winter of 1929 - 1930, almost ten million kulaks -- men, women and children -- were deported to the arctic. These supposedly "rich exploiters" owned around $150 worth of property. A typical kulak would have something like 12 acres, a cow, a horse, ten sheep, a hog and about 20 chickens on a farm supporting four people.

The kulak category was later broadened to include "subkulaks" who were not kulaks by party definition, except that they shared kulak "attitudes."

In the villages, teams headed by Communists from the cities, supported by GPU men (secret police) held violent denunciation sessions to meet their quota of kulaks. Even now these latter were often defended by poor villagers, who themselves were then labeled "subkulaks."

Some 100,000 kulaks were shot. The remainder (except for the very old who were left to their own devices) were evicted from their homes, and marched to the nearest railway. Huge line of peasants converged on the trains which took two to three thousand people in cattle trucks, on journeys lasting a week or longer, to the arctic. In the unheated trucks, deaths, particularly of infants, was common. On detraining, they might spend some time crammed starvino into the confiscated churches of Archangel or Vologda, or go straight to their destinations -- typically being marched for several days to a clearing in the forest and told to make their own homes. About three million died in the early stages, predominantly young children. The survivors either had to create farms in the frozen wilderness, or were sent to work on such projects as the Baltic-White Sea Canal, on which about 300,000 died (and which was never of any use).

The kulaks and subkulaks, of course, included all the natural leaders of the peasantry, especially those resistant to the new collectivization. After their removal, the bulk of the remaining peasants were forced into the collective farms.

There was much resistance. Sporadic armed risings involving whole districts took place, especially in the Ukraine and the North Caucasus. But scythes and shotguns could not prevail against the armed forces of the GPU. They were ruthlessly suppressed. But so was more peaceful resistance.

The only peasant tactic which had a measure of success was the astonishing "women's rebellions": peasant women would prevent confiscation of their cows, and the authorities were often at a loss as to how to cope. The peasants' main reaction, however, was to slaughter the cattle. In a few months, over 40'ro of the country's cattle and 65'7o of the sheep had gone. Stalin's policy lay in ruins. Like Lenin, in March 1930 he made a tactical retreat. Peasants were now allowed to leave the collective farms. 16 million families had been collectivized. Within a few weeks, 9 million left.

But they were not allowed their land back. They were given rough ground at the edge of the ploughland. Then heavy taxes were imposed on them. A huge new wave of dekulakization removed the more recalcitrant. And over the next two years, the bulk of the land was again collectivized. The system was inefficient from the start, and the countryside soon presented, as Soviet Nobel Prize novelist Boris Pasternak described it, "such inhuman, unimaginable misery,
such a terrible disaster, that it began to seem almost abstract, it would not fit within the bounds of consciousness."

The collective farm system, still the Soviet Union's agricultural mainstay, was an economic disaster. Even in the 1950s, the new mechanized farms were admitted to be producing less than the pre-World War I moujik with his wooden plough ... A schematic idea had failed, at enormous human and other cost.

Dekulakization and collectivization were virtually complete by mid-1932. It was now that Moscow launched the third and most lethal of its assaults -- the terror-famine against the peasants of Ukraine and some neighboring areas, in particular the largely Ukrainian Kuban.

Soviet Academician Sakharov refers to Stalin's "Ukrainophobia." But it was not an irrational Ukrainophobia. In the free elections of November 1917, Ukraine had voted overwhelmingly for the national parties. The Bolsheviks got only 10% of the vote, and that mainly in Russified industrial centers. Over the next few years, independent Ukrainian governments rose and fell. Twice Bolshevik governments were established by Russian troops, but only on the third attempt was the country finally subdued. The first two efforts had made virtually no concession to nationalism. The view of Lenin and his subordinates was that Ukrainian was merely a peasant dialect. It was only after bitter experience that it was seen that Ukraine could not be mastered without some recognition of its national feeling.

Just as the peasants were temporarily placated by the New Economic Policy, so with the Ukrainian nation. Over the next eight or nine years, Ukrainian culture was allowed to flourish, and high officials and supporters of the former independent Ukrainian government were given posts. But there were always Moscow's complaints and apprehensions about the national tendencies thus encouraged. Thus, starting in 1929, a violent mass purge was initiated first of non-Communist, then of Communist cultural and political figures. During the years that followed, some 200 of the 240 published authors in Ukraine were shot or died in camps, together with a wide swathe of all other intellectuals, from agronomists to language specialists.

But in Stalin's view "the national problem is in essence a peasant problem." The decapitation of the Ukrainian culture was now accompanied by a blow at its body, the peasant bulk of the nation. The peasantry of Ukraine and contiguous areas had also been the foremost in resisting collectivization. They were thus as it were, a double target. Stalin's Secret Police Chief in the Ukraine, Balitsky, spoke of a "double blow" at the nationalists and the kulaks.

The Ukrainian countryside had already, in 1931 - 32, suffered grain requisitions which left it on the point of famine. In July 1932 Stalin issued the decisive decree: 6.6 million tons of grain were now to be delivered. The figure was far beyond possibility. Ukrainian Communist leaders protested, but were ordered to obey. As Soviet novelist Vasily Grossman puts it, "the decree required that the peasants of Ukraine, the Don and the Kuban be put to death by starvation, put to death along with their little children."

By November 1. 41% of the delivery plan had been fulfilled, and there was nothing left in the villages. There were again protests from leading Ukrainian Communists who told Stalin that famine was raging. They were rebuffed and ordered to find the grain. "Brigades" with crowbars searched the peasants' houses and yards. A little hidden grain was sometimes found, the peasant then being shot or sent to a labor camp, but in general the villages were now living on all sorts of marginal edibles -- cats and dogs, buckwheat, chaff, nettles, worms, ground bark.

The borders between the Ukraine and Russia were blocked by police posts which prevented bread being brought back. About a third of Ukraine itself was officially blockaded so that not merely bread, but no supplies of any sort, could enter. In the Ukrainian cities a small ration was issued, but in the countryside nothing at all.
The cities were barred to the peasants by guard posts. Even so, when the last food had gone, many peasants managed to crawl to city centers. It was forbidden to feed them, or treat them medically, and they either died on the spot or were removed in twice weekly roundups.

Back in the countryside, while any strength remained, families would come to the railway lines in the hope of being thrown a crust. Arthur Koestler, who was then in Kharkiv, describes this: "the stations were lined with begging peasants with swollen hands and feet, the women holding up to the carriage windows horrible infants with enormous wobbling heads, stick-like limbs and swollen pointed bellies. . . "

They returned to die in the villages. It is not our purpose to harrow you any further, but you need only envisage famine scenes as in the world today, with a single difference -- that no aid or relief organizations were present trying to alleviate things. Indeed, it was illegal -- even in the villages! -- to suggest that famine was taking place.

Infants like those described by Koestler were particularly vulnerable and many died. Children of 7 or 8 often also died, either at home or rounded up into special centers and given some, largely inadequate food. But many, after their parents died, joined the wandering bands of the "Homeless Ones" and lived by petty pilfering. Others, indoctrinated in Party's "Pioneers" organization, were used by the authorities to help harass the peasants. Some became much-publicized heroes by denouncing their own parents.

One of the most moving descriptions of the famine is by Vasily Grossman, a Soviet Jewish writer, whom we have already quoted. His mother was killed at Auschwitz, and he himself wrote the first documentary description of the Nazi death camps *The Hell of Treblinka*, and was joint editor of the Soviet section of the Black Book on Nazi atrocities (never published in the Soviet Union). He gives us, in his novel *Forever Flowing*, the most harrowing description and indictment of Stalin's slaughter of the Ukrainian peasantry, and quite explicitly makes the parallel with Hitler, adding that in the Stalinist case it was a matter of Soviet people killing Soviet children. And the death roll was indeed on the Hitlerite scale.

A census taken in January 1937 was suppressed and the census board were shot as (in the words of an official communiqué) "a serpent's nest of traitors in the apparatus of Soviet statistics"; they had Pravda stated, "exerted themselves to diminish the population of the Soviet Union".

During Khrushchev's time a later head of the Census Board wrote sardonically that the State Planning Commission had been very incompetent in its population predictions, having forecast 180.7 million for 1937 when the real total was 164 million. This enormous discrepancy can be reduced to about 1/2 million for various reasons (for example, children unborn owing to prematurely dead parents). Of this, the famine deaths seem to have been about 7 million -- 5 million in Ukraine, 1 million in the Kuban and North Caucasus, 1 million in the Don and lower Volga. 3 + million had already died during dekulakization, and about 1 million (out of some 4 million) Kazakhs had perished as a result of the banning of their nomad life and resettlement on desert "farms." To this 11 + million we must add some 3 - million for the peasants in labor camps during the 1937 census (many of whom perished there later) for a reasonable estimate of approximately 141/2 million victims of the entire anti-peasant and anti-Ukraine campaign. The total dead in all countries during World War I was under 9 million.

*Arthur Koestler is a Hungarian-born British writer whose novel *Darkness at Noon* analyzed the psychology of victims of Stalin's 1930s purges.*
There have been many useful books, usually of a specialist nature, about one aspect or another of
the Stalinist revolution in the countryside, and many individual testimonies have also appeared;
but there has not previously been a general history covering the whole phenomenon.

Yet the material only needed to be brought together. We have literally hundreds of first hand
accounts, from victims and from officials, from foreign communists and from journalists: that is,
first hand observers. We have official material, both from the early 1930s and from the
Khrushchev period " which strongly indicates much of the truth. And we have fiction, from the
orthodox Sholokhov in the 1930s, through novels published in the USSR in Khrushchev's time and
even in the early 1980s, to say nothing of samizdat and émigré work, in which the events are
presented in only slightly dramatized form.

All of them tell, or contribute to, the same story. Every point made here can be overwhelmingly
documented. Soviet history, and therefore the Soviet Union today -- and so the world today --
cannot be properly understood without a full knowledge of such major determining events as those
described above.

Excerpted from Congressional testimony presented before the United States Ukraine Famine