

THE GREAT FAMINE OF 1921-1922

Revolutionary Russia (1917-1922)

The Russian Famine of 1921–22, also called the Povolzhye or the Volga Famine, began in the spring of 1921 and lasted for over a year. Between five and eight million people perished.

By 1921, Russia and Ukraine had suffered six years of war. Armies (invading Germans of WWI, the White Army, the Red Army, the Black Army, and national independence fighters) had ravaged the countryside, taking food from the people and seizing the farmers' crops. Most farming was done with little machinery, and the farmers could not effectively grow crops with so much interruption. Crop production drastically dropped as a result.

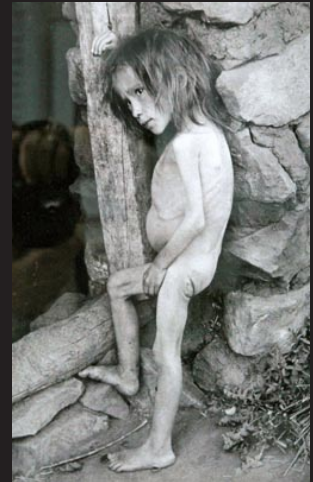
Russian farmers experienced droughts every five to seven years, leading to occasional crop failures and food shortages. Most of Russia's peasants prepared for these crop failures by storing a year's grain in reserve.

But from 1918 to 1921, Lenin's policy of "war communism" was in effect. War communism meant that all agricultural goods, including grain stores and seed grain, were requisitioned from peasants and distributed among the population. All private enterprise was banned, down to the common garden. The government controlled the railways, all industry, and rationed food.

The Bolsheviks saw the decline in crop production as meaning that the peasants did not support their efforts to



One of the iconic images of the Great Famine of bodies of victims piled up in Buzuluk, in the Volga region, where the famine was worst.



Starving Russian girl in Buguruslan, 1921

establish communism in the country (which was true; they hated the requisitioning). Lenin ordered peasants' houses searched. Their food stores were seized, as well as their stores for lean years and their seed grain. This left them with nothing to eat.

The year 1921 brought almost no rain at all. The farms yielded only about half what they had before the war years started. In some areas, about a quarter of the grain crop was lost, while other areas suffered total crop failure.

Thus began the Great Famine of 1921. Survivors tell how Moscow and Kiev were "littered with dozens of corpses." Rural villages were hard hit. People ate whatever they could find: seeds, acorns, weeds, tree bark, even the corpses of dead animals. The poor food quality contributed to disease. People left their villages hoping to find food in other areas, unwittingly spreading typhus, typhoid fever, smallpox



A starving family in the U.S.S.R., around 1922.



A famine victim who dropped in the street next to her child. From the Exhibition on America's Humanitarian Aid to Soviet Russia during the Famine of 1921-1923, Public Domain.

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A postcard showing two boys in the final stages of starvation. Their limbs are skeletal and their bellies are swollen from eating grass, straw, tree bark, worms, and earth. This is part of a postcard set sold in 1922 to raise funds for the Russian famine of 1921-22. By Fridtjof Nansen (1861–1930), Public Domain.

influenza, dysentery, cholera, and bubonic plague.

The famine spawned accounts of murder, cannibalism, and a black market that traded human flesh. Along the Volga River, where the famine was most severe, some of these accounts have been verified by Russian historians and American relief workers, while other reports may be exaggerated. But it is certain that in some areas starving peasants dug up recently-buried corpses for the meat they provided. One woman refused to bury her dead husband because she was eating the flesh off his body. Parents and siblings ate the bodies of dead children. And a starving boy named Ilarion Nyshchenko, who lived in Zaporozhia just across the river from Nieder-Chortitza, killed and ate his 3-year old brother.

An aid worker wrote later in 1921: "Families were killing and devouring fathers, grandfathers and children. Ghastly rumours about sausages prepared with human corpses, though officially contradicted, were common. In the mar-

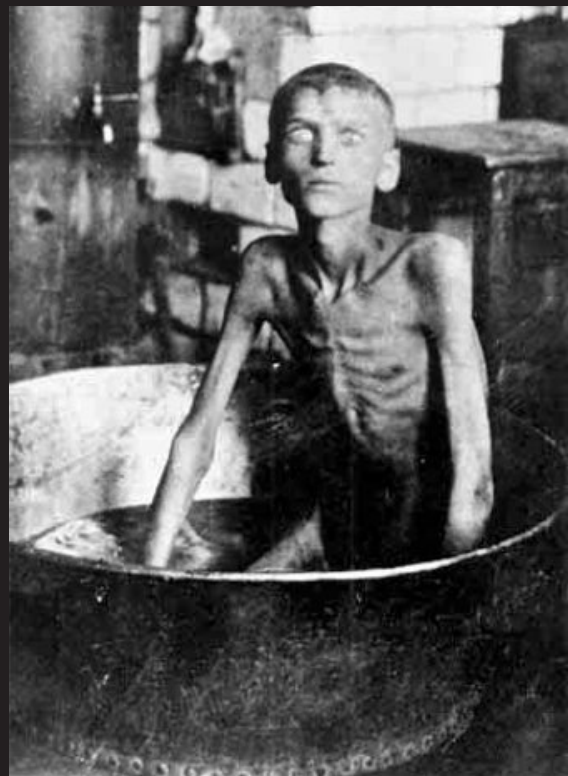
ket...one heard threats to make sausages of a person."

Lenin was eventually convinced to reverse his policy at home and abroad. He allowed relief organizations to bring in aid, and decreed the New Economic Policy (NEP) on March 15, 1921, which relaxed requisitioning and permitted some small amount of capitalism (including private gardens, where the people were permitted to keep what they had grown) to exist on a small scale.

The American Relief Administration (ARA) imported over a million tons of grain into Russia and Ukraine, and at the height of the famine, fed more than 10 million people per day. The Bolsheviks never formally accepted or acknowledged the ARA's relief effort in Russia.

In fact, the Soviet government continued to export grain all throughout the famine. They were raising money for industry and modernization of the Soviet Union, one of many instances in Russian communist history in which state policy was valued above human life.

By 1923, the famine was over. The drought had ended, the ARA had imported seed grain, and the NEP gave people a reprieve from requisitioning.



A starving boy from Blahovishchenka, Ukraine (in the province of Zaporzhia) named Ilarion Nyshchenko who killed his 3-year-old brother and ate him (1921–22).

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"One day I saw a father with four children in the same bed, had been dead for two days, the children too weak to leave the bed and call for help," wrote Johann Rempel of Nieder-Chortitza. This picture depicts a similar occurrence elsewhere.

A Mennonite Eyewitness from Nieder-Chortitza, Ukraine

All rhetoric pales before the grim realities of the famine that ravaged the Ukraine in 1921-1922...A few examples will be sufficient to show the picture of human suffering as we experienced it in those two years...

The catastrophe was made more horrible by such diseases as cholera and typhus which raged everywhere. [We lacked] hospital facilities, medicines, trained staff... People died like flies in their homes, on the street, and on the road... In 1920, thousands of fugitives from the Volga came to the Ukraine, their wagons loaded with household goods, children, women, and the aged, drawn by horses with bones showing through their skins. For months they had been on the road, in rags and filth, living on offal, chaff, bark, and clay, and dying at an appalling rate. And scarcely had they reached the Ukraine when there came the great drought of 1920 and 21... In despair many of them returned to the Volga to die at least in their own homes...Others stayed passively awaiting death.

It is now in the winter of 1921. The famine has reached such a scale that words fail to describe it. The crop was a total failure, the grain mostly being so sparse that it could not be cut with a machine and had to be harvested painstakingly by hand. The people go about emaciated and weak, living ...on all kinds of refuse. Cases of cannibalism are not wanting, parents and children murdering one another. At the headquarters of the Cheka in a nearby city almost daily were posted pictures of people who had been condemned to death

for cannibalism, in order to deter others from doing the same thing. But hunger knows no fear of punishment.

People are digging their own graves for fear that soon they will be too weak to do so and they will remain unburied. The dead are buried naked to save the clothing for the living. And by no means all can afford a wooden box as coffin. One day I saw a place where the father, with four children in the same bed, had been dead for two days, the children too weak to leave the bed and call for help. In the same house, but in another room, lay two dead Makhnovites, already in a serious state of decomposition. Still in another room of the same building an old laborer, whom I had known very well, probably in a state of delirium, had tried to jump out of the window, but had been too weak and so had died right there, hanging partly out of the window. But why multiply examples. If help does not come soon...I shudder to think of the consequences.

Roughly 3 percent of Nieder-Khortitza's villagers – 33 men and children – died of starvation... The death toll would have soared far higher had the Bolshevik government not finally allowed U.S. and Dutch Mennonite Relief organizations to distribute food in 1922.

*Johann Rempel was a school teacher in Nieder-Chortitza, and later became village soviet. The above account comes out of David G. Rempel & Cornelia Rempel Carlson's book, *A Mennonite Family in Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union, 1789-1923*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press: 2002), 253.*



People turned to cannibalism to stay alive. Here are Russian peasants displaying their human meat to sell.