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Interview

Collectivization in USSR Saved the Lives of a Great Many Europeans

GT Continues its series of interviews with Dr Grover Furr - a professor at Montclair State University, Montclair NJ USA

I have been interested in the topic of collectivization and famine (Golodomor) for a long time. I've been in contact for years with Dr. Mark Tauger, professor at West Virginia University and the best researcher in the world on the question of Soviet famines. Unlike other researchers, Tauger is strictly objective, neither anticommunist nor pro-Stalin or pro-communist. He is looking for the truth.

According to Tauger, there were hundreds of famines in Russian history, about one every second or third year. There were serious famines in 1920-1921, 1924, 1927, and in 1928.

Q: Why do some historians believe that collectivisation and industrialisation were the biggest mistakes of Stalin and the Bolsheviks?

A: In 2001 Tauger published an article about the 1928 famine titled "Grain Crisis or Famine?" The "Volga famine" of 1920-1921 is well known, in part because of the Nansen relief commission, which took many horrifying photographs of the suffering. But the famines of 1924 and 1927-1928 are largely ignored. When they don't ignore them, anticommunist researchers deny that these were "famines", calling them instead "regional and local problems."

They do this in order to hide the fact that famines of greater or lesser intensity occurred in Russia very frequently. Anticommunist writers would like others to believe that such famines were rare until collectivization. But in reality, famines were common, and collectivization was largely an attempt to solve this perennial problem.

In a famous passage in his memoir of World War II, Hinge of Fate, Churchill quoted Stalin as saying:

"Ten million," he said, holding up his hands. "It was fearful. Four years it lasted. It was absolutely necessary for Russia, if we were to avoid periodic famines, to plough the land with tractors."

Churchill wrote these volumes years later and his memory was probably far from precise. But no one has suggested that Churchill invented this passage about "avoiding periodic famines." Indeed, it is true. Tauger is currently at work now on a study of these previous famines.

Therefore, collectivization was necessary not simply to fund industrialization - though it was indeed essential for that purpose. It was essential to put an end to periodic famines, during which a great many people died.

And 1932-33 was the last famine, except for the postwar famine of 1946-1947, the basic cause of which was the immense destruction caused by the war. This fact is virtually always erased in discussions of the famine of 1932-33.

Collectivization caused death, for sure! Nobody denies it, certainly not I.

Not to collectivize would also have caused death. The status quo caused deaths - from famines... Continuing the NEP (New Economic Policy) would have caused deaths from famines.

So, all conceivable choices cause death. Two ways to approach this are: First - the death of whom?; and Second - how many?

Collectivization was aimed at those who dominated the villages - the rich peasants ("kulak"). The status quo concentrates most suffering among the poorest. The status quo favored the rich over the poor. Collectivization favored the poor over the rich. In fact, the rich get richer during famines, since they can buy up foodstuffs and then force prices up.

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Popular News

How many, if there was no collectivization? There are lots of possibilities. Here is one. War - the Bolsheviks were convinced that some combination of European powers, perhaps with Japan, would invade the USSR, and sooner rather than later. That is exactly what happened.

Collectivization made industrialization possible. Without industrialization the USSR would have had no modern army.

The Nazis almost conquered the USSR as it was, killing 28 million completely innocent Soviet citizens.

Q: Suppose there'd been no modernized Red Army, and the Nazis had conquered the USSR?

A: If the Nazis had conquered the USSR a great many more Soviet citizens would have been killed. That was Hitler's plan. With no two-front war to worry about, and with all the resources of the USSR at his disposal, Hitler would have been a much more serious foe against the Allies. Hundreds of thousands, maybe millions more Allied soldiers and civilians would have been killed by the Germans and their allies - including the Ukrainian Nationalists, the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (Українська Повстанська Армія), also known as the 14th Waffen-SS Division.

Hitler had serious plans to invade the British Isles. He might have done that! How many citizens of the UK would have been killed? A lot!

The Japanese would have been far, far stronger against the Allies in the Far East. They'd have gotten men and materiel from the Nazis, Sakhalin petroleum from the conquered USSR. They'd have killed many more British, French, Dutch, Chinese, Vietnamese, and Americans.

And let's not forget about the Jews. With a free run throughout Europe - for Hitler had already made quick work of the British and French armies.

Q: do you think Hitler would have killed even more Jews than he did?

A: I think it's unquestionable. Of course he would have! Along with a huge number of other "Untermenschen" (недочеловеки), mainly Slavs.

Therefore, one could say -- very reasonably -- that Collectivization in the USSR not only saved a great many lives of Soviet citizens. Collectivization saved the lives of a great many Europeans, Chinese, Americans, and even Japanese and Germans. The longer the war lasted, the more soldiers and citizens in the Axis countries would have been killed too.

That means in terms of the good that it did and the evils that it avoided, collectivization, with all of its problems and deaths, was one of the great triumphs of the 20th century.

The only alternative to collectivization of agriculture was to allow famines to continue every 2-3 years indefinitely, as the Tsars had done; and to forego industrialization for decades, if not forever (if the Nazis had their way all Slavs would be reduced to uneducated serfs).

Without very rapid ("crash") industrialization, the Red Army could not have been ready to fight the Nazi invasion.

Looking back on the Bolsheviks' experience with collectivization and industrialization we can learn a lot. The Chinese Communists, Vietnamese Communists, etc., certainly did! They resolved not to slavishly imitate the Soviet example, and they did not do so.

But the Bolsheviks - "Stalin", if you insist - were the first. They did not have the benefit of hindsight. It is to be expected that they would make many decisions that later turned out to have been mistakes. That is always the case with pioneers.

During collectivization the Bolsheviks made many, many errors. But it would have been an immeasurably greater mistake not to try in the first place!

And here is the problem. It is unfashionable, "politically incorrect," to point these things out. The prevailing anticommunist, and specifically anti-Stalinist, orthodoxy - especially among elites, East and West - make it literally unprintable. It's a fact, it's the truth - but "you can't say it."

I am not trying to "find excuses" for Stalin and the Bolsheviks of his day. They simply did the best they could.

Given what they knew, and the situation of the USSR in 1928, there was no other recourse for them but crash collectivization and industrialization.

No historian or economist has ever come up with a viable alternative plan that the Bolsheviks could have adopted in 1929. Not one! Even if someone were to invent such a plan, however, he would then have to show that the Bolsheviks - Stalin or somebody else - could have known about it in 1928.

I doubt this will happen. We know today that there were a great many casualties caused by collectivization. But we only know that because we can look back and see how it developed. Stalin and his comrades could not see that in 1928. They did not have the benefit of historical

hindsight - of being able to learn from their own experience!

Today, we do. Even so, no one has come up with a workable alternative. Therefore, historically speaking, there WAS no alternative.

This is a direct, though polite, challenge to anti-Stalin, anticommunist historians and others to stop all the hand-wringing and moralizing, and explain what the viable alternatives to collectivization were.

Jacob Jugashvili and Eka Buchukuri (from Georgian edition of "The Georgian Times")
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