

# Kazakh Famine 1928-1932

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*Between 1928 to 1932 a great famine took place in parts of the Soviet Union due to the forced collectivization policy by the Bolsheviks. Some historians accuse Joseph Stalin of purposefully targeting people and others blame the famine on poor management, policy errors, and local misunderstanding of the general idea in making reforms in agriculture. This paper attempts to give the reader a better understanding of what happened in Kazakhstan when collectivization brought massive human losses and the end of Kazakh nomadism as a way of life.*

*Key Words: USSR, collectivization, nomadism, Stalinism, Kazakhstan, famine, Holodomor.*

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## Introduction

Study of Great Famine of 1928-1932 in Kazakhstan, which is the most tragic event in Kazakh history and is largely unknown to the Western public and researchers in general. Was it just another page of communist crimes along with the gulags, purges, or something even more sinister?

Research questions for this paper are the following:

1. What happened in the Kazakh case of Soviet collectivization?
2. Why did it happen?

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2.1 Was the famine a deliberate way to pacify Kazakh nomads who were resistant to the Soviet State?

2.2 Was it caused by local Kazakh officials?

2.3 Was it due to incompetence of the policy makers who didn't understand the nomadic way of living?

3. How is the famine remembered in Kazakhstan? What is the political position?

Research methodology — interviews with historians and journalists. Analysis of state memory policies in monuments, public actions, and interviews or speeches by state leaders. Literature on the famine in Russian, Kazakh and English. Novelty of the research is an attempt to create an overall picture of the causes of the Famine in Kazakhstan.

## 1. What happened?

Between 1928 to 1933 a major famine swept through Ukraine, Kazakhstan, and other parts of the Soviet Union. According to Sarah Cameron and Nicolas Werth, Kazakhstan had become one of the main grain and livestock producers for the Soviet Union. (Cameron, 2016: 119) (Werth, 2016: 38) Beginning in 1929, the Soviet leader Joseph Stalin launched the First Five Year Plan (Cameron, 2016: 118) The Five-Year Plan consisted of forced collectivization and industrialization. Collectivization of private peasant production units meant the people that owned their farms were now state employees of the Soviet State and their farms then belonged to the state. Implementation of the plan was partially voluntary and by force via special measures in selective taxation of rich households and exempting those who organized themselves into collective farms. Prior to that central planning for collecting either grain or livestock was tested. In earlier times when Soviets under Lenin had used this forced expropriation policy — *prodrazverstka* — it led to a massive rebellion by the peasants. Stalin made all of them part of the state production and distribution system to obliterate any possibility for resistance.

A quota was given to nomadic households on how much livestock they had to give to the Soviet State. Often, these quotas were unreachable and a large amount of the livestock that would have been used by Kazakh families and local consumers were sent to other parts of the Soviet Union. Quite often, the meat would simply rot as it was poorly stored and livestock died because of the inability to work in the nomadic style of grazing.

Rich Kazakh landowners had their properties and livestock confiscated and were sent to prison starting in 1928 under the slogan of fighting with *bais* (rich ones). The policy was carried out by the local Soviet official Filipp Goloshchekin, who had arrived in Kazakhstan in 1925 (Pianciola, 2004: 139). Russia partially excluded the rich ones in their own territory as one of the main consequences of the civil war in Russia, as Kazakh society was to a certain extent observing and not participating actively in the civil war, allowing the rich ones to survive up to 1928.

Senior history researcher Talabek Omarbekov of Al-Farab University shared how his family was treated by the Bolsheviks, “My grandfather was a rich Kazakh man, who engaged in horse breeding. He was imprisoned because he was one of the wealthiest men in the area and died in 1930 in Aulie Ata prison.” (Omarbekov, 2016)

The Kazakhs were given unreasonable quotas and new collective farms were created in Kazakhstan. Due to a lack of food for the animals they began dying in large numbers, resulting in an overall food shortage for the local population. In addition, grain producing farms were also given unreasonable quotas compounding the lack of food.

When all the animals were taken, and gathered in designated areas per Soviet policy, the animals were not able to eat sufficiently as the nomadic way of grazing implies relatively constant migration over large territories with an adequate amount of sheep, cows and horses. As a result, the grass gets eaten by the lead animals and the rest are not able to feed themselves. Once the animals died, people began to die in massive numbers.

The famine reached its peak in 1932 but the Soviet government moved slowly to react to the famine under constant bombardment with letters from Kazakh authorities requesting food to help. Emergency aid was offered from the West, yet Stalin refused to accept train shipments of grain denying that there even was a famine. During a previous famine in 1921, Soviet leader Vladimir Lenin had accepted western help and millions were saved in Russia and Kazakhstan. By the end of 1933, the famine had been brought under control.

The famine killed between 6.5 and 7 million people with approximately 4.2 million in Ukraine and 1.5 million in Kazakhstan (Werth, 2016: 35). Researcher Zhyldyzbek Abylkhozyn, one of the foremost experts on the famine, estimated approximately 1.75 million deaths in Kazakhstan due to the famine; though he emphasized it was an approximation as records were insufficient (Abylkhozyn, 2016). Cameron points out that the Kazakhs lost over a third of their population, thus, becoming a minority in their own republic (Cameron, 2016: 120). This figure of human losses is a subject for political debate in Ukraine, Russia and especially Kazakhstan. Kazakhstan is a unique case because social consensus has not been achieved yet. Ukraine has recognized the famine as a criminal case and possible genocide. Russia, with its revival of imperial ambitions and glorification of the USSR has avoided this issue. Meanwhile, Kazakhstan continues debating.

## 2. Why did it happen?

According to Kazakhstani journalist Vladislav Yuritsyn, one has to take into account the atmosphere of the time. The October Revolution had happened in 1917 just over a decade before, and as the revolution was regarded as a great success, it was believed by Goloshchekin and other party officials that another so called ‘Small October Revolution’ was necessary to propel Kazakhstan into the industrial age (Yuritsyn, 2016). ‘Small October’ meant that Kazakhstan had not had its October Revolution yet, and the rich ones were still in power. The days following the civil war also meant the value of human life was quite low. The Soviet leadership, who had been active militants 7-10 years prior, were used to incurring a high number of human losses to achieve their goals. Goloshchekin for example, had participated in the execution of the Russian Tsar Nicholas II and his family, including the women, children, and even the family doctor.

Speaking about the regime’s attitude and lack of knowledge toward the Kazakh people and lifestyle Omarbekov says,

Stalin had never been to Kazakhstan. He did not know anything about the Kazakh lifestyle. And even Goloshchekin who was the local leader, appointed directly from Moscow, had never been to a Kazakh village. That is why no one could predict that Kazakh’s would die. Stalin and all of his governors thought that Kazakh’s were a backwards people. He did not even consider them to be human beings. His main goal was to keep Russians in control, and in senior positions. And he wanted to Russianize all of the Kazakh’s and similar ethnic groups. Before 1991 when Kazakhstan became

an independent republic, the policy of Moscow was to make all the Kazakhs forget their national language and to Russianize the population (Omarbekov, 2016).

Omarbekov points out that although it had been apparent for many months that there was a famine in Kazakhstan with large amounts of livestock starving as well as people, the local officials were too afraid to tell Stalin of the crisis, fearing they would be blamed. Thus, the first known letters regarding the famine were not sent until the summer of 1932, and it only mentioned that livestock were starving neglecting to report the massive amounts of people who were already dying. Letters to Moscow mentioning people starving were not sent for at least another few months, again due to fear of being blamed by Moscow. In rebuttal that Kazakhs were specifically targeted, Yuritsyn states that more Russians died as a result of the famine throughout the Soviet Union, though he acknowledges that percentage wise the number of ethnic Kazakhs that died was much higher — his estimate being nearly fifty percent. He goes on to say,

The Soviet's wanted to force collectivization and they started to work to make that happen. Even the local officials, who were Kazakhs, Russians, Latvians, and Jews got orders from Moscow, they said that it would not work. However, their recommendations either did not get to Moscow, or they were ignored (Yuritsyn, 2016).

Quite directly, Omarbekov and Abylkhodzyn blame Stalin and his regime for causing the famine (Omarbekov, 2016; Abylkhodzyn, 2016). We can say that the Soviet system itself viewed the people not as the citizens but as a resource which could be replenished.

## **2.1 Was the famine a deliberate way to pacify Kazakh nomads who were resistant to the Soviet State?**

Unlike memory of the famine in Ukraine, where the narrative generally accuses Stalin of using genocide to tighten his grip on power, (Ukrainian Genocide 1932-1933, 2018) (Commission on the Ukrainian Famine, 1988), less of that sentiment exists in Kazakhstan. Regarding whether the famine was intentional Professor Gulnara Dadabayeva of KIMEP University says,

But as far as I see the works of the Kazakhstani historians, they provided a lot of documents where the local authorities, where the central authorities acted extremely brutal. They used force, death penalties, a lot of dangerous and tragic things in order to implement their plans, But, at the same time there is not any evidence that within the high party authorities, there existed any kind of plan to destroy at least 30 or 40 percent of the Kazakh population. What for? (Dadabayeva, 2016)

Thus, the famine is regarded by many to be due more to bad management, fear of Stalin, and irresponsibility versus an intentional act. Division among even academic, non social activists, on this issue in Kazakhstan is evident. Some claim it was a conscious extermination and genocide of the Kazakhs who were self-sufficient on food and out of the political reach of the repressive Soviet State; others claim it was a political error of an inefficient political and economic system.

Although it is debatable whether the famine in Kazakhstan was intentional, brutal methods were used to pacify the population. For instance, there were rebellions against the forced collectivization campaign. And the Soviets responded accordingly, “To put down the various rebellions Soviet Headquarters sent the 8th Cavalry Division and some were even bombed by aircraft” (Omarbekov, 2016). In addition, racial discrimination was quite evident against the native population.

In search of food, tens of thousands of Kazakhs fled Kazakhstan to Russia, China and other Soviet Republics. Niccolo Pianciola reported that it was common for people to pose as security agents to steal from the refugees (Pianciola, 2004: 173). Many of the refugees were forced to return to Kazakhstan and they were treated as the lowest class, living without shelter, while the colonists lived in homes (Pianciola, 2004: 176). In addition, food rations for the Kazakhs were lower than for the colonists and there were even reports of Kazakhs being lynched by Russians and Soviets (Pianciola, 2004: 177).

As part of the collectivization campaign, the Soviets wanted to break up the “tribal solidarity” (Pianciola, 2004: 148) and as Dadabayeva explains one of the priorities of the Soviets was to produce a population that considered the state their god so to speak, above religion or tribal loyalties (Dadabayeva, 2016). Thus, seizing the wealth from the rich livestock owners was a means to destroy “the tribal solidarity” that prevented the state from controlling socio-economic relationships in rural areas so that it could reshape them for its own ends” (Pianciola, 2004: 148).

Still several questionable actions were taken by Stalin and the regime. Sarah Cameron points out that “Stalin knew of the Kazakhs suffering at several key points during the famine yet offered no concessions” (Cameron, 2016: 123). She also reports that the Soviets closed the borders to the fleeing Kazakhs at the height of the famine — worsening the crisis (Cameron, 2016: 126). And Nicolas Werth states that Stalin viewed any resistance to his collectivization policy, whether Ukrainian or Kazakh, as a war against the state that must be won by a “knockout punch”, in order to break the will for resistance and achieve total assimilation to the state. He goes on to say that Stalin considered the Kazakh nomads as living an “unredeemable” way of life that had to be done away with forever (Werth, 2016: 48). This ability for the Kazakhs to exist outside of the state distribution system caused Stalin to view the Kazakhs as dangerous, or at least with suspicion.

As stated earlier by Omarbekov, the first letters concerning the famine reached Moscow in the summer of 1932. According to Werth, in the same month Mikhail Khataevich, a party secretary, requested Stalin to “revise the plan downward”, so that the farmers would have enough food and be able to sow for the next year’s harvest (Courtois, et al., 1999: 164). Viacheslav Molotov, First Secretary of the Moscow Communist Party, responded by denouncing Khataevich’s request, stating that the needs of the state cannot be put into second place (Courtois, et al., 1999: 164).

In April 1933, Mikhail Sholokhov wrote two letters to Stalin complaining about the treatment of workers on a collective farm in Kuban — which had a high Ukrainian population. He complained about the methods used to punish workers for not meeting quotas and for hiding grain such as stripping them naked in the open air, simulated executions, and even burning them. For instance, “The feet and the bottom of the skirt of the female workers are doused with gasoline and then set alight. The flames are put out, and the process is repeated...” (Courtois, et al., 1999: 166). Stalin responded in a letter,

The fact that this sabotage was silent and appeared to be quite peaceful (there was no bloodshed) changes nothing — these people deliberately tried to undermine the Soviet state. It is a fight to the death, Comrade Sholokhov!

Of course this cannot justify all the abuses carried out by our staff. The guilty few will be forced to answer for their actions. But it is as clear as day that our respected workers are far from being the innocent lambs that one might imagine from reading your letters. I hope you stay well, and I offer a warm handshake. Yours,  
J. Stalin (Courtois, et al., 1999: 167)

Kazakh party leaders wrote several letters asking for help, describing the human casualties, and all the terror made during collectivization to local people. Some of those who wrote these letters were later purged like Turar Ryskulov (executed in 1938). Although Stalin was responding to the crisis in Kuban, it sheds light on his indifference to the treatment and suffering of the workers. Thus, it is reasonable to conclude that in respect to Kazakhstan collectivization, assimilation of the Kazakhs into the new system was the priority and avoidance of the famine was not.

## **2.2 Was it caused by the local Kazakh officials?**

Certainly, there was negligence on the part of the local Kazakh officials. In fact, there was a reluctance to take responsibility for the situation, again due to fear of punishment from Moscow. Omarbekov states that “The local Kazakh authorities were afraid to inform Stalin about the situation. They wanted Goloshekin to go away, and they thought that if the situation got worse that he would be sent away” (Omarbekov, 2016). In other words, local officials knew that the situation was turning into a disaster, and they hoped that Goloshekin would be blamed for it and relieved of his position.

Sarah Cameron supports the point that the local authorities in Kazakhstan were also responsible for such a high level of human loss and their short-sighted policy of collectivization. We think this is only part of the blame as the central authorities in Moscow had developed the policy of planned expropriation of the livestock. Placing some blame on the local authorities is fair as neighboring Kyrgyzstan was similarly nomadic, but the human losses were not so staggering.

The problem with the local ethnic Kazakhs who had become communist nomenclature was that they valued their privileged position of being a communist more than of being a Kazakh. They were co-opted by the communist party and acted according to the communist party directives. Which is one of the reasons why people today tend to forget the tragedy of the famine in Kazakhstan, as many people who are alive today are descendants of those who actively lead the communist policies. This memory can be divisive for the Kazakhs under growing Russian sentiments for their imperial revanche.

## **2.3 Was it due to incompetence of the policy makers who did not understand the nomadic way of living?**

One of the primary causes of the famine was a disconnect between policy makers in Moscow and the local Moscow representatives such as Goloshekin and the Kazakh people.

Vladislav Yuritsyn pointed out that Goloshchekin had never been to Kazakhstan and did not know about the science of nomadic herding. Yuritsyn explains,

... the herd can consist of 600 heads of sheep, so while one sheep is eating the grass the next one is fanning out further to eat, and the next one is fanning out even further than the previous one, and so on. When you have 2000 heads of sheep instead of 600, the sheep in the rear have to cover such a distance as they fan out for new grass, that they end up starving to death (Yuritsyn, 2016).

Therefore, as Moscow wanted to force progress at a rapid rate, they consolidated livestock farms and introduced an amount of sheep and other livestock that the land could not support, thus causing them to die on a massive scale.

At the height of the famine Goloshchekin was removed from his position in January 1933 (Pianciola, 2004: 170). Though Pianciola reports that apparats in Kazakhstan and especially Kazakh officials were criticizing and asking for the removal of Goloshchekin, other scholars believe that Goloshchekin was merely a tool following the orders of Moscow and had no choice. Therefore, focusing responsibility on Goloshchekin is a convenient way for the Soviets to avoid responsibility for their actions. (Abylkhozyn, 2016; Omarbekov, 2016).

In addition to problems caused by not understanding nomadic methods, there were also national security issues, or at least that is the way Stalin saw it. For instance, once the famine became known to the West, grain and other aid was sent by train from Europe. Tragically, the desperately needed food was turned away. Professor Dadabayeva describes the rationale, “It’s explained by the geo-political situation, the Soviet government did not want to show its weakness in the face of the — enemy, as the West was usually seen by the Soviet government” (Dadabayeva, 2016). Soviet authorities used the grain as an export commodity to obtain Western technologies for industrialization and thus acknowledging the famine would have interfered with their objectives.

### **3. How is the famine remembered in Kazakhstan? What is the political position?**

In contrast to Ukraine, there is less discussion of the famine in Kazakh society. While Professor Dadabayeva explains that it’s important to speak about the famine carefully as Kazakhstan still has a large Russian population in addition to Russian speaking non — Kazakh ethnic groups like Poles, Ukrainians, Koreans and Russian speaking Kazakhs as well.

Why society is quite not probably indifferent, but less active concerning the discussions of the famine of the 1930’s yes because partly because it is past and we should be very careful concerning certain things and accusations in order to avoid clashes between people (Dadabayeva, 2016).

This is better understood by taking into account Kazakhstan’s proximity, economic dependence, and vulnerability to Russia. There are many ethnic Russians living in Kazakhstan, especially in northern Kazakhstan close to Russia’s borders, and Russian TV also dominates Kazakh media.

Ethnic clashes caused by a reawakening of unresolved offenses could give reason for Russia to send its military to Kazakhstan in order to protect Russians. Perhaps annexing parts of Kazakhstan with a high percentage of ethnic Russian as they have done in Crimea. There is

also a fear of Russia becoming more aggressive concerning efforts to install leaders that they can control; especially, if it seems necessary to counter Kazakh nationalism. Nevertheless, since the 1990's Kazakhstan has moved away from the famine as a subject (Cameron, 2016: 121). In a speech in 2012, President Nursultan Nazarbaev urged Kazakhstani's to remember the famine but warned against "politicizing" it (Cameron, 2016: 121-122).

A new generation of Kazakhs have grown up in a freer and independent Kazakhstan. Unfortunately, memory of the famine is being lost. Abylkhodzyn says sadly that his generation will remember the famine but for the next, its memory is fading (Abylkhodzyn, 2016). Likewise, Omarbekov says that for the young people, the famine seems like a fairytale (Omarbekov, 2016).

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