Anne Applebaum's 'Red Famine': Starvation in Ukraine, and its long legacy

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LEFT: AKHIL AHMAD
Anne Applebaum, author of "Red Famine."

by Glenn C. Altschuler, For The Inquirer
Red Famine

Stalin’s War on Ukraine

By Anne Applebaum

Doubleday.

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Reviewed by

Glenn C. Altschuler

In June 1932, Joseph Stalin told his subordinates to “pay serious attention to Ukraine.” He refused to take responsibility for the famine that was killing millions. Instead, he blamed the famine and unrest on “anti-Soviet” elements. He subsequently unleashed a purge to ensure that Ukraine was transformed “into a true fortress of the USSR.”

In Red Famine, Anne Applebaum (a columnist for the Washington Post and the author of Gulag: A History and Iron Curtain: The Crushing of Eastern Europe) provides a riveting account of one of the most horrific (and least-known) acts of state-sponsored genocide in the 20th century, and the backstory for the 21st-century conflict between Russia and Ukraine.

Red Famine includes heart-rending, stomach-churning details of the suffering visited on Ukrainians. Far from being the result of bad weather or crop failure, starvation was caused by collectivization, the seizure of food from the homes of peasants to meet Soviet grain
quotas, and propaganda that warned Ukrainians against assisting “enemies of the State.” So neighbors stole from neighbors. Some starved to death; others ate their corpses.

The Soviets also imposed a policy of de-Ukrainization. They destroyed church property and arrested priests, restricted the use of the Ukrainian language and references to Ukrainian history, arrested Ukrainian nationalists, and resettled tens of thousands of Russians in the region.

The Soviets convinced Western European and American journalists and politicians (who saw Stalin as a potential ally against Hitler) that stories of mass starvation were grossly exaggerated.

Ukrainians, Applebaum indicates, did not forget. As the Soviet Union began to come apart in the 1980s, Ukrainian nationalists demanded an open discussion of the famine. As a sovereign state, Ukraine has publicly commemorated the tragedy, to ensure it never occurs again.

Clearly, Russian fears of losing Ukraine did not disappear with Stalin’s death. In 2015, Applebaum notes, Russian-backed separatists destroyed a monument in the Ukrainian town of Snizhne dedicated to famine victims; a website sponsored by the Kremlin labeled the famine “one of the twentieth century’s most famous myths.”

These days, alas, fake news often trumps truth. But Red Famine gives us reason to believe that reality, too, can have bite.

Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University.