

## “Kulak” and Food Crisis During the Civil War in Soviet Russia

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### Abstract

Food crisis was a very serious issue during the Civil War in Soviet Russia, which was mainly due to the revolt or resistance of the kulak in the countryside of Soviet Russia. To some extent, “Kulak” allowed the hunger situation in some regions of the Soviet Russia to go unchecked, which was believed to be a very severe threat for the new Soviet regime. Therefore, to eradicate the menace, the Bolsheviks led by Lenin adopted the policy of the resolute repression and deprivation of the kulak. As a matter of fact, in a word, according to the logic of the Bolsheviks, kulak was the culprit that engendered the famine, so kulak must be responsible for it, and kulak must pay the bill.

**Key words:** Kulak; Food crisis; The civil war; Soviet Russia

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### INTRODUCTION

After the October Revolution of Russia in 1917, food crisis tended to be serious in Soviet Russia. It evolved into a great famine in the spring of 1918, which had been a recurrent issue. For resolving the food crisis, winning the internal and external war, and then consolidating the nascent Soviet regime, the Bolshevik led by Lenin had declared “food supply dictatorship”. However, the kulak

turned blind eye to food shortages of urban or the front-line troop boycotted it. Thus, Lenin thought “kulak” must be “responsible” for the situation that urban workers and the frontline army soldiers had caught in starvation, and also must pay the price for their “sins”.

### 1. CONCEPTIONS: “KULAK” AND “PROSPERING PEASANT”

Foremost, what was the Soviet kulak and prospering peasant, and also the distinction of the two conceptions, this is the basis of this research.

Who was the Soviet kulak? For this question, some Scholars of domestic and international Academia have made a full and accurate investigation. In my opinion, “kulak” is the one who was declared to be kulak by the authorities, which is a very vague term that anyone perhaps could be included.

In nature, it could be roughly divided into two distinct stages from June 1918 to the early 1930s: Firstly, from June 1918 to March 1921, Lenin believed those who food (including newly harvested grain) doubled or more doubled than their own consumption (family rations, livestock feed, and seeds) could be regarded as prospering peasants. (The Compilation and Translation Bureau of Marx, Para. 7, 1987, Vol.35, p. 28) Those who did not hand over their surplus grain must be repressed and deprived in the name of “enemies of the people”; Secondly, From the Middle and Late 1920s to the early 1930s, despite the Bolshevik introduced some relevant documents (i.e., the criteria for classification about kulak) for assessing the “kulak”, but the content was so ambiguous that this concept was rather like the definition of “saboteur”, which could include every person:

Poor and middle peasants, peasants with large families (and therefore greater land or other resources), the families of Red army soldiers and industrial workers, members of the rural intelligentsia (i.e., teachers, agronomists, doctors), byvshie liudi

(literally former people—notables from the old regime), and anyone who dared to object.” (Lynne Viola, 2007, p.36)

Who was the Soviet prospering peasant? After the October Revolution of Russia in 1917, the “kulak” (i.e., prospering peasant) was those who had developed into the “wealthy peasant” within the principles of the “New Economic Policy”, let alone previously the individual had been the inferior kulak, middle peasants or poor peasants. A scholar pointed out that the source of the stratum of prospering peasants consisted of three parts in the Era of “New Economic Policy”:

(a). Inferior kulak in pre-revolution or those who be called “tiny kulak”. As are relatively adept in managements, they can rapidly rebuild their own economy and get developing in the extent permitted by law; (b) The estate of middle peasants; (c) Poor peasants.” (Liu & Jin, 1990, p.179)

As to the distinction between the kulak and prospering peasant, the Academic of domestic and foreign agreed that the “kulak” was not the same as “prospering peasants”, even though generally speaking of the kulak which has already included the prospering peasant. In fact, the kulaks and wealthy peasants had constantly been confused as a concept, and put as a political conception in any event. Generally speaking, the term “kulak” is more attribute of politics, but “prospering peasant” is more of an economic characteristic. Consequently, both of which should be treated diversely, although the former more or less contains a certain degree of economic component (The term kulak dates to at least the middle of nineteenth century, when peasants and educated Russian used it to describe the most prospering peasants in the village). (Cathy A. Frierson, Semen Samuilovich Vilenskiĭ, 2010, p.34)

## 2. “KULAK” WAS FORCED TO TAKE THE BLAME FOR FAMINE

“Bread”—Food as one of three slogans (the other two are “Peace” and “Land”) of the October Revolution of Russia in 1917, which illustrated the Bolshevik put an emphasis on grain issue. Food collection mainly served the front-line military and satisfied the need of urban residents. Actually the tsarist and the interim government had taken such as fixed-price, deprivation, brute-strength, food monopoly, and other means for endeavoring to resolve food crisis, but its’ effectiveness was insignificant. Therefore, the Bolsheviks took over this heavy legacy from the former administration.

For the watchword “Peace” and “Land”, “Decree on Peace” and “Land Statute” was promulgated by the Soviet government, but no ordinance for the motto “Bread”. If any, “surplus collection system” (i.e., “food supply dictatorship”) may be an edict. In fact, the Russian word “продразверстка” is not be translated as “surplus collection system”, an accurate translation should be “food

appropriation system”, because the first half of this word (i.e., прод) is the abbreviation of “food”, and the later part of it (i.e., разверстка) is equivalent to “distribution or apportionment”. (Xu, 2011, p.47) Then, what was the “food appropriation system”? It was an economic policy that the entire surplus grain belonged to the Soviet government who stipulated the price of grain and prohibited all private sale of grain.

Why the grain crisis occurred? As for Lenin’s view, it was mainly due to the revolt or resistance of “food supply dictatorship” from the kulak in the village, although Soviet Russia “just inherited a collapse and severe economic destruction.” (The Compilation and Translation Bureau of Marx, para.7, 1987, Vol.34. p.342)

As Lenin pointed out, food crisis of urban was increasingly severe, which was due to “the condition that kulak attacked on the urban region, Soviet regime, poor peasants got rampant, and more frenzied.” (Ibid.)

Moreover, “kulak” resisted the Soviet regime by “not turning over food to the Soviet government, in addition to the use of weapons.” (Ibid.) Wherein, so-called “not turning over food” and “weapons” mean that: Firstly, the kulaks and prospering peasants protested “food supply dictatorship” who were unwilling to sell grain to the Soviet government at a fixed low price; They acceded to the revolt by force which the oppositions organized in many domestic grain producing regions.

Kulaks and wealthy peasants (For the convenience of discussion, both hereinafter referred to as “kulak”.) possessed surplus grain, but were reluctant to sell grain to the Soviet government at a regular price, and also engaged in the speculative trade of food, which to some extent allowed the hunger situation of the urban workers, poor peasants, agricultural workers, frontline troops to go unchecked. In Lenin’s opinion, the reason of famine was not due to inadequate grain in Soviet Russia, but because the bourgeoisie and all the wealthy (including rich man, kulak in rural areas) made a final struggle with the Soviet regime on the most important and most acute problem (i.e., commissariat). Breaching the monopoly of grain, the distribution methods of provision, the fixed price, and executing the speculation.

Lenin considered that although the Soviet government actualized “food supply dictatorship” which had been expressly stipulated by the law in Soviet Russia, effectively it was suffered the destruction of the bourgeoisie and all the rich:

the rich man, kulak, tyrant had oppressed the people of village for several decades in the countryside, and now preferred to rely on speculation, illegally brewing wine to profit, the justification was that it could make them get rich. As for bringing about the sin of famine, they pushed it to the Soviet regime. (Ibid., Vol.34, p.336)

“Kulak” who partook in the speculative trade of grain could “earn one hundred, two hundred, or even

more rubles per pood.” (Ibid., Vol.34, p.334) The Soviet government set a fixed price of 6 rubles per pood on grain in the first half of 1918, but its’ price as high as 100 rubles, and sometimes up to 200 rubles or even more on the black market. (Ibid., Vol.34, p.418)

Meanwhile, “kulak” joined the revolt by force which the counter force (such as the White Army) organized in many domestic grain producing areas (i.e., Volga River basin, Siberian region etc.). Lenin deemed that the kulak was an internal enemy of Soviet Russia, and also became a reliable object that the “robber” of capitalism of Britain and Japan which assumed the offensive to Russia where was at peace allied with: “Kulak who joined with foreign capitalists were opposed to domestic workers cruelly injured or killed the working class by the bloody and unheard means in all places.” (Ibid., Vol.35, p.35)

As Lenin said, the famine relentlessly threatened all poor peasants and urban workers in many industrial provinces, which were caused by the “kulak” who took two means (i.e., “not turning over food”, “weapons”). By the end of April 1918, “the ration reduced to 50 grams per day in Petrograd. Furthermore, only 100 grams of food a day in Moscow, where transportation of grains almost stalled and Surplus was very little.” (Kim, 1960, p.152)

Did “kulak” sit on the sidelines the food shortages of urban? As an independent scholar Lar T. Lih from Canada said: “the image created by the food supply crisis of a ghoul who laughed at groans of the starving and wanted to choke the revolution with the bony hand of hunger.” (Lih, 1990, p.148) For this, Shire Bertrand explained:

Mir (i.e., Russian traditional communal) which supported ‘peety bourgeois individualism’ regarded the family as production units. And this individualism combined with local selfish doctrine that Mir’s activities led to, which was sufficient to show the reason why ‘kulak’ could keep quite coldly that the city lacked of food and fell into an extreme difficulty. (Bertrand, 1975, p.297)

In this regard, I could not quite agree. However I believe that at least we could give a reasonable explanation in economic terms: compared to the price of the black market (i.e., 100 rubles per pood, sometimes even 200 rubles per pood), the rigid price (i.e., 6 rubles per pood) (The Compilation and Translation Bureau of Marx, para.7, Vol.34, p.420) was much too low, although the Bolsheviks increased the food price to 30 rubles per pood on the basis of the original (To encourage “kulak” to deliver grain to the Soviet government, Lenin recommended whether the raising price may be temporary or not). (Ibid., Vol.35, p.27)

In fact, as analyzing the reasons for grain purchase crisis in 1927–1928, Bukharin had pointed out: “I totally agreed that the price should be paramount.” (E.H.Carr, R.W.Davies, 1969, p.79) Yet noted out, Lenin considered a behavior that the interim Prime Minister Alexander Kerensky increased the price of food to double as the connivance of “kulak”. (Ibid., Vol.34, p.381)

In summary, Lenin believed it was an inextricable relation between famine and “kulak”. Namely, “kulak” was the culprit who caused famine, and must be responsible for it.

### 3. “KULAK” WAS OBLIGED TO PAY FOR SO-CALLED SINS

How to deal with this food crisis? Lenin advocated that the Bolsheviks could take grains from peasants in the rural districts, “demanding peasants supply food” (Ibid., Vol.33, p.65), since the Soviet Russian had much “enough” cereals. Just as Lenin envisaged: “As long as we inventoried grain, identified all existing storages, and punished the illegal activities, famine will not appear in Soviet Russian.” (Ibid., Vol.34, p.250) Thence, if kulak did not hand surplus grain to the Soviet government at a fixed price, they would be severely castigated. Wherefore Lenin called the kulak to surrender surplus grain, avoid speculating, and not to exploit the labor of others. Otherwise, we would relentlessly combat with you.

In other words, putting an end to the food crisis means that the Soviet government made a desperate fight with the kulak: “Kulaks knew that it was time to put a final and brutal battle for Socialism.” (Ibid., Vol.34, p.420) “No any margin where we could have a doubt. Kulak was the sworn enemy of the Soviet regime. Not kulak killed countless workers, or workers ruthlessly put down the insurrection that the predator of kulak who was the minority of the population objected to the regime of laboring people. There was no a middle path. The working class and kulak could never live in harmony with each other, because it was not difficult for the kulak to make his peace with landlords, tsarist and priests, even if they had occurred quarrel, but would never be possible for the working class.” (Ibid., Vol.35, p.36)

The food problem had risen to political height, which is to say the matter of “kulak” was became a political issue. Lenin instructed the local Soviet government to combine the repression of “kulak” with the confiscation of their properties or grains at least twice in August 1918. Such as Lenin sent a telegram to Penza Province Presidium President Alkyne MinKim on August 12<sup>th</sup> 1918, suggested that he took advantage of the opportunity of the repression of kulak’s revolt to confiscate their cereals, which could consolidate the poor peasant’s regime in the frontline region. On August 19<sup>th</sup> 1918, Lenin telegraphed to the Executive Committee of Zee Dorothy Wits of Orel province, directed that they put the repression revolts of kulaks and the Left Socialist Revolutionaries with the confiscation all the food of kulak together.

Moreover, On August 20<sup>th</sup> 1918, Lenin wired to the Executive of Levny County of Orel province, praised that the county repressed kulaks forcefully, and confiscated all those who were involved in rebellion grains or properties. (Ibid., Vol.35. pp.606-608) The strife was not just an



economic discord on the front of food, which could be portrait as a political dispute about the Soviet regime's existence. To some extent, the outcome of struggling with kulak was the fate of the new Soviet regime. Just as Lenin pointed out: "It looked like this was just a battle for food, actually it was the clash for Socialism." (Ibid., Vol.34, p.420)

However, Lenin believed that food was plundered by "a variant of the capitalist" (Ibid., Vol.29, p.165) —Private Farmer (i.e., kulak), the government depended on a strong, armed force to purchase the grain which was looted by the kulaks at a fixed low price.

Moreover, such an approach was undoubtedly correct. on August 11<sup>th</sup> 1918, Lenin sent telegram to Kulayev, indicated that: "It must be the most resolute, the most rapid and most ruthless for the repression of the uprising kulaks, from Penza transferred part of the armies, the confiscation of all the riots' properties and food," "drawing up a draft decree—Each village of grain production should take 25–30 richer as hostages, they must use their lives to ensure that all surplus grain would be collected,"

The interests of the revolution required to do so, it should come up with a model.....seeking for some tough: (a) Hanging (being sure to hang, so people could see) no less than 100 flagrant richer, kulaks, vampires; (b) Publishing their names; (c) Confiscating all their grains; 4.Specifying the hostage. Let people see it in the radius of a few hundred, all trembled, knew, and shouted: "The vampire of kulak was hanged by them," all to be hanged. (Central Compilation and Translation Bureau, 2000, p.4)

During the grim period in the civil war, Lenin's telegram to the provinces and letters was full of these tones: "Hang," "Toughness," and "Merciless terrors." (Jin Yan, 2012, p.1) But the force of peasant was applied by the Bolshevik, which is tantamount to wage a war against them, was a naked violent plunder. Although the Soviet government utilized a brute-force for the "kulaks", but the Soviet government obtained no small successes. For instance, the first half of 1918 the Soviet government only acquired 28 million poods of grains, but the second half procured 67 million poods, so the number was still considerable. (Tang, 1986, p.66) Understandably, food crisis could be solved to some extent for providing a lot of help with the consolidation of the new Soviet regime.

Of course, the "kulaks" had defied "food supply dictatorship", which even to some extent was considered to be a very arrogant deed. The most famous was started as early 1918. Generally peasants' revolt of Tambov province was deemed to begin in 1920, which was not accurate. In fact, in addition to it could be confirmed by the archives, the historian Sennikov also pointed out that the uprising of the peasants of Tambov province actually began in early 1918. (Xu, 2011, p.47)

Peasant's revolt in Tambov province, ultimately it was quelled by the Soviet government which resorted to the army. Also as, (a) Stashing food: kulak utilized a variety of methods to conceal food—some of the food was hidden

in wall, the floor, some made wine by food, and some also put a large of number of food into the ground, then soil was covered on the above where they could plant potatoes; (b) Killing the member of requisition: When confiscated surplus grain of "kulak", the members of forager often were brutally murdered or thrown into the river by them, then drowned. At the time, a 25 person teams of levy-escort frequently left only 4 to 10 people finally. (The group of theory of Dalian Red-flag shipyard machine repair shop workers, The group of Political Economic of Liaoning Normal University Department of History, 1975, p.26)

However, compared with the Soviet government's coercive power, it was only "trivial" or "an ant trying to shake a big tree" (i.e., counter the coercive power of the Soviet government was far beyond the strength of kulak).

Generally speaking, to achieve the promise—"there will be bread" (a classic lines in the famous film "Lenin in October"), Put the brute violence on peasants, especially the ingredients of capitalism—kulak who was considered to be the primary responsibility for famine. In other words, kulak must pay for the price for these "sins", this was the logic of the Bolsheviks.

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## CONCLUSION

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In summary, generally we could conclude like this: In Lenin's view, "kulak" should be accountable for famine, and also must pay the price for these "sins". "Kulak" was unwilling to sell the grain at a fixed-price to the State, but which was considered as a revolt or resistance against "food supply dictatorship", so as to lead urban workers, poor peasants, and army's supply of grain to a much critical situation. Meanwhile, kulak joined the revolt by force which the counter force organized in many domestic grain producing regions. Therefore, the Bolshevik thought "kulak" was a very serious threat. Just as Lenin believed: "Kulak was the sworn enemy of the Soviet regime..... It could be no middle path there..... (Kulak and the working class) could never be harmony with each other." Thus, "kulak" was coerced to take the blame for an irrational policy of Bolshevik, and also was compelled to pay the price for the consequence of it.

However, the violence to peasants which not only caused their casualties, but also was an almost devastating blow to the productivity in rural regions, and which to a certain extent led to the "Great Famine" of 1921–1922. For winning the war, the food supply gave priority to military. The team of food collection of armed workers not only confiscated "kulak" surplus grain, usually also imposed family rations, sometimes the seeds of the next year. So it was a heavy stroke for peasant's enthusiasm of production, which was an important motive for the outbreak of famine. What's more, the Bolsheviks preached and ignited the class of struggle between kulak and other peasant peers, which overturned the "warmth" that "though the end of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth,

a kulak often enjoyed the respect of his peasant peers.” (Frierson, 1993, pp.139–160)

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