

A brief note on the scale and incidence of the Kazakh Famine, 1931-33

The Kazakh famine is the least well understood part of the complex of famines that affected the USSR in the early 1930s.

The collapse of the population registration system (ZAGS) was much more severe in Kazakhstan than in Ukraine. In Ukraine the conjunctural (early warning) system was badly affected but the full annual system continued to work. In Kazakhstan the full annual reporting system seems to have collapsed and was still not working in 1936 when Kazakh statisticians were required to provide preliminary estimates of what the population would be prior to the 1937 census. The Kazakh statisticians had to use taxation data to guide themselves and their leaders as to what the scale of the population loss had been at this time.

The 1937 census provided more accurate indicators of the scale of the population loss, but these indicators were not accepted at the time. The government declared the census to have been wrecked. Many statisticians and demographers were arrested, and two of the leaders Kraval' and Kvitkin were shot. Only when the repeat census of 1939 came up with virtually the same results, were these figures, implying a massive loss in population, officially accepted.

For Kazakhstan the census figures and the preliminary evaluations made in 1936 and based on taxation data are compatible, but they indicate a large flow of population into Kazakhstan to compensate for the large losses of the 1931–33 period.

The taxation data show a population decline in Kazakhstan in comparison with the 1926 census levels. In 1931 the data show a small decline of 3.8%. In 1932 the decline has risen to 29.3%, and in 1933 it reaches a maximum decline by 38.9%. After a few years of recovery in 1936 Kazakh UNKhU officials were still reporting that the population was 21.2% below 1926 census levels. When the 1937 census was carried out the census reported that the population in Kazakhstan was still 15.6% below the 1926 level. And it was only later at the time of the 1939 census that there are reports that the population in Kazakhstan had just re-attained the 1926 census level.

The ethnic dimension of the decline as recorded in the censuses was much sharper. The number of ethnic Kazakhs in the population of Kazakhstan declined by 39% from 1926 to 1937. Even with some small growth in the Kazakh ethnic population from 1937 to 1939, there was still a decline by 34.9% in the Kazakh population in the 1939 census when compared with the 1926 census.

For the USSR as a whole the number of ethnic Kazakhs had fallen by 27.9% from 1926 to 1937, and had risen to a fall by 21.9% from 1926 to 1939. This was a significantly greater fall than for all other nationalities. The decline in Ukrainian ethnic population was by 15.3% from 1926 to 1937 and by 9.9% from 1926 to 1939. 116

Another indicator of the intensity of the famine is the extent to which the population born in the famine years and surviving the famine years compares with earlier and later cohorts. We can measure this age specific loss in the censuses, and these provide a slightly different picture with a higher degree of age-specific population loss in Ukraine than in Kazakhstan.

The maximum age-specific losses in comparison with the 1927 cohort for Kazakhstan fell in 1932 to a loss of 39%, followed by a loss of 37% in 1933. Whilst for Ukraine the maximum age-specific loss fell in 1933 with a 57% loss followed by a 45% loss in 1932. The losses for each oblast have been calculated and it can be shown that for Kazakhstan the worse affected oblasts

were Karagandy (–54%) in 1932, Pavlodar (–50%) in 1932 and Kustanay (–49%) in 1933. No Kazakh oblast fell close to the average range of losses for Ukraine (–57%).

What do these figures tell us? They raise several problems. We need to know more about the scale of migration of nomads, and the scale of assimilation of Kazakhs into the Russian population between the 1926 and 1937 censuses. But if we ignore these problems for now, these data indicate that the population losses in Ukraine appear to have been more evenly spread across the whole Ukrainian population, whilst in Kazakhstan there appears to have been a sharper segregation between the population that suffered and the survivors.

The overall population losses in Kazakhstan appear to have been much greater than those in Ukraine, although the effect of these losses on the survivors left in the country appears to have been greater on the Ukrainians than on the Kazakhs. This is a topic that needs to be more seriously investigated. We need to know more about the reliability of the statistical data, more about migration processes, and more about assimilation practices, but there can be no doubt that the level of the crisis was enormous.

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