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Article in *Slavonic and East European review* · January 2015

DOI: 10.5689/slaveastorev.2.93.1.0096

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# Demographics, Inequality and Entitlements in the Russian Famine of 1891

ERIC M. JOHNSON

## *Introduction*

Thomas Malthus called famine ‘the most dreadful resource of nature’.<sup>1</sup> From his perspective, the reality of overpopulation and limited food supply was so great that, if imbalance ever occurred, it would decimate even the mightiest empire. No matter how strong a nation might be at the vanguard, ‘famine stalks in the rear, and with one mighty blow levels the population with the food of the world’.<sup>2</sup> In the Russian famine of 1891–92 this dreadful resource was made manifest in a crop failure within the heart of the country’s fertile black soil territory. In seeking to explain the event, twentieth-century scholarship has framed the lead up to the crisis in largely Malthusian terms. Teodor Shanin writes that ‘Russian ruralities seemed caught in a “Malthusian cycle” of more and more population chasing after produce’.<sup>3</sup> According to Hari Vasudevan, ‘Much of what happened was a consequence of land hunger and a large increase in the rural population’.<sup>4</sup> Likewise, Gary Hamburg states, ‘the central fact of the period was the demographic revolution that threatened to overrun land resources and outstrip food production. [...] In years like 1891–92, the delicate balance between food supply and population shifted, and the result was famine’.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, while it has been clearly established

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, London, 1809, vol. 2, p. 74.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Teodor Shanin, *Russia as a ‘Developing Society’: The Roots of Otherness: Russia’s Turn of the Century*, New Haven, CT, 1985, vol. 1, p. 141.

<sup>4</sup> Hari S. Vasudevan, ‘Peasant Land and Peasant Society in Late Imperial Russia’, *The Historical Journal*, 31, 1988, 1, pp. 207–22 (p. 212).

<sup>5</sup> Gary M. Hamburg, ‘The Crisis in Russian Agriculture: A Comment’, *Slavic Review*, 37, 1978, 3, pp. 481–86 (p. 485).



that a crop failure precipitated the famine, characterizing the disaster as simply a case of overpopulation and limited resources is to overlook crucial details of the crisis. In the years leading up to the harvest failure a profound demographic shift was indeed taking place, but it was not of the Malthusian variety as these authors have claimed. Rather, the country was undergoing rapid industrialization that resulted in a breakdown of the traditional agrarian economy and a shift towards regional specialization. When the famine struck, the crisis was not a failure of food availability, but a failure of food entitlements.<sup>6</sup>

Amartya Sen defined food entitlements as the full range of legal rights that a person could utilize in order to eat, whether growing food, buying food, working for food, or being given food by others. Food entitlements are therefore a recursive relation of ownership connecting labour, property and exchange to food where each link in the chain of entitlement relations is legitimized by reference to another. The calculation of what Sen refers to as an individual's 'maximum food entitlement' quantifies all earnings based on property or labour, whether in the production of crops for personal consumption or through earned wages, and converts this into a single value adjusted by the food exchange rate at that time.<sup>7</sup> The calculation allows for a comparison between individuals as well as geographic areas that have different modes of economic subsistence by reducing everything, ultimately, to the ability of people to feed themselves. Individuals face starvation if their maximum food entitlement does not allow them to acquire enough food for subsistence. In this way, food entitlements are 'the set of alternative commodity bundles that a person can command in a society using the totality of rights and opportunities that he or she faces'.<sup>8</sup>

For three decades prior to the famine the tsarist regime had argued before the world that reforms were being implemented, that conditions were improving, and that prosperity was on the horizon. On the surface this appeared reasonable. Twenty-one million peasants had been freed from the authority of the hereditary landed gentry, nationwide mortality was steadily decreasing, crop exports were on the rise, foreign investment was increasing substantially and the nation hoped soon to have a

<sup>6</sup> For an overview of entitlements, see Amartya Sen, *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation*, Oxford, 1981.

<sup>7</sup> Sen's calculation can be represented as  $F_j = Q_j E_j$  where  $F_j$  is the maximum food entitlement,  $Q_j$  is the amount of a given commodity (crops, labour, etc.) that each member can sell or consume, and  $E_j$  is the food exchange rate (price of the commodity to be sold divided by the price of food per unit). When the commodity produced is also the food source the calculation changes simply to  $F_f = Q_f$  (for that subset  $f$  of people who have no other commodity but the food they've grown). *Ibid.*, pp. 45-51.

<sup>8</sup> Amartya Sen, *Resources, Values and Development*, Oxford, 1984, pp. 497.



favourable enough balance of trade to join the gold standard.<sup>9</sup> However, the devastating crop failure and resulting mass starvation suggested that such rapid development came at the expense of millions of peasants who had long been living on the brink of disaster. Soviet historian Peter Lyashchenko wrote that the 'overburdening of the peasant economy with land taxes, redemption payments, and other collections' in the 1870s and 1880s was the cost that came with 'the rapid development of industrial capitalism'.<sup>10</sup> In many provinces unpaid taxes had increased to more than 200 per cent and provincial governments resorted to 'beating arrears' out of debtors with birch rods.<sup>11</sup> As news of the famine spread, such stories found wide appeal in the international press. 'The taxes are being collected with the rigour and regularity which has always characterized the Ministry of Finances,' wrote a *New York Times* editorial:

Measures are about to be taken, however, to systematize the collection of taxes and arrears. It is said that the Government intends to purchase a number of flogging machines of a kind recently invented, which will carry out the sentences rapidly and methodically.<sup>12</sup>

Whether such a plan was real or not Russian satirists circulated drawings of a machine designed to resemble the tsar, his whip raised in mid strike, as the indebted peasant lay bleeding and raw beneath him.<sup>13</sup> Government critics likewise blamed peasant conditions on these onerous taxes, a reality that the crop failure turned into a crisis. One eloquent commentator, State Comptroller Petr Shvanebakh, charged that there was such a passion to accumulate revenue that the government completely overlooked the conditions of the poor:

<sup>9</sup> For an overview of emancipation, see Hugh Seton-Watson, *The Russian Empire, 1801–1917*, Oxford, 2004, pp. 341–48; for a survey of mortality, see K. David Patterson, 'Mortality in Late Tsarist Russia', *Social History of Medicine*, 8, 1995, pp. 179–210; for detailed data on annual crop exports, see Paul R. Gregory, *Russian National Income 1885–1913*, Cambridge, 1982, pp. 222–45; for levels of foreign investment, see John P. McKay, *Pioneers for Profit: Foreign Entrepreneurship and Russian Industrialization, 1885–1913*, Chicago, IL, 1970, and for Russia's pursuit of the gold standard, see Olga Crisp, *Studies in the Russian Economy Before 1914*, London, 1976, p. 100.

<sup>10</sup> Peter I. Lyashchenko, *History of the National Economy of Russia to the 1917 Revolution*, trans. L. M. Herman, New York, 1949, p. 557.

<sup>11</sup> Jeffrey Burds, *Peasant Dreams and Market Politics: Labor Migration and the Russian Village, 1861–1905*, Pittsburgh, PA, 1998, pp. 47, 79.

<sup>12</sup> 'Russians Facing Famine – Miracles Needed to Ward Off the Danger', *New York Times*, 13 July 1891.

<sup>13</sup> Burds reproduces one such drawing from the journal, *Diatel: ezhenedel'nyi organ politicheskoi i obshchestvennoi satiry* (The Woodpecker: A Weekly Organ of Political and Social Satire). Burds, *Peasant Dreams and Market Politics*, p. 80.



[The Finance Ministry] failed to take the pulse of the country, did not notice its weakening and the threatening symptoms of atrophy, did not see, or did not want to see, that the brilliant results of [the] administration were purchased at the price of overexertion. Let us agree that the crop failure of 1891 was an 'accidental' phenomenon, but this 'accident' played the role of an accidental cold infecting a weakened subject: a strong organism throws it off with little difficulty, [but if] the organism [is] already exhausted, the accidental cold leads to a serious and prolonged illness.<sup>14</sup>

Given this context, it was a fitting irony that one of the earliest government officials to report upon the famine was a tax collector. In May 1891, Aleksei Ermolov, the Director of Indirect Taxation from the Ministry of Finance, was touring the Volga province to evaluate the effectiveness of a new tax policy when he witnessed vast fields of withered cropland and peasants in desperate circumstances. As he described in the report to his superiors, 'The terrible spectre of famine is advancing on Russia. It is necessary now, while it is not too late, to take the most decisive measures to prevent the impending disaster'. According to Ermolov, after reading his report Minister of Finance Ivan Vyshnegradskii thrust the papers into his desk and locked it. 'Your notes will never come out of this drawer', Vyshnegradskii told Ermolov. 'No one should know of this — otherwise you will spoil my rate of exchange.'<sup>15</sup>

#### *The harvest failure and crisis conditions*

Whatever role government policies may have played in setting up the conditions for tragedy, one fact is clear: the famine was precipitated by a natural disaster. According to the Russian Department of Agriculture the winter of 1890 arrived early, was colder than usual, and was accompanied by only light snowfall.<sup>16</sup> Temperatures averaged between -25 to -30°C, while along the Volga they were as low as -50°C. Low temperatures continued until early April at which point there was a steady increase associated with high winds. Little rain fell throughout the spring or summer and hot winds lifted the dry topsoil creating massive dust storms. On 3 July 1891, Count Illarion Ivanovich Vorontsov-Dashkov, Minister of the Imperial Household and advisor to Emperor Alexander III, wrote a letter to His Majesty from the Tambov countryside stating: 'Here we are getting ready

<sup>14</sup> Peter Shvanebakh, *Denezhnoe preobrazovanie i narodnoe khoziaistvo*, St Petersburg, 1901, p. 28, cited in Richard G. Robbins, *Famine in Russia, 1891-1892: The Imperial Government Responds to a Crisis*, New York, 1975, p. 193, n.23.

<sup>15</sup> Aleksei Ermolov, *Nashi neurozhai i prodovol' stvennyi vopros*, St Petersburg, 1909, 1, p. 100.

<sup>16</sup> Robbins, *Famine in Russia*, p. 1.



to go hungry. The peasants' winter crops have failed completely. [...] The situation is one of the utmost seriousness and demands immediate aid.<sup>17</sup>

According to precipitation data and documentary records, rainfall levels in 1891 made this year one of the five driest winters in Europe during the last 150 years.<sup>18</sup> European Russia has long been subject to climate-related crop failure, most frequently as the result of drought, and has experienced drought conditions at least sixteen times between 1891 and 1995 (an average of once every 6.5 years).<sup>19</sup> Drought conditions are defined as any year where precipitation is less than 80 per cent of the long-term mean value and temperature anomalies are greater than 1.0°C over at least 15 per cent of the affected area.<sup>20</sup> There have been five severe droughts in which more than 40 per cent of European Russia experienced drought conditions.<sup>21</sup> The drought of 1891 was not the most severe on record, but the political consequences that resulted make it one of the most important.

Whatever the ultimate cause may have been,<sup>22</sup> as a result of the drought crops from the famously fertile black soil territory suffered a debilitating failure. Writing from the southern steppes in the spring of 1892, soil scientist P. Zemyatchenskii bore witness to the conditions:

<sup>17</sup> Cited in *ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>18</sup> Others included 1858, 1874, 1882 and 1992. C. Casty, H. Wanner, J. Luterbacher, J. Esper and R. Bohm, 'Temperature and Precipitation Variability in the European Alps Since 1500', *International Journal of Climatology*, 25, 2005, p. 1863.

<sup>19</sup> Anna V. Meshcherskaya and V. G. Blazhevich, 'The Drought and Excessive Moisture Indices in a Historical Perspective in the Principal Grain-Producing Regions of the Former Soviet Union', *Journal of Climate*, 10, 1997, pp. 2670–82.

<sup>20</sup> Those areas experiencing excessive moisture during the same year are subtracted from areas experiencing drought to arrive at a combined index. Dronin and Bellinger come to a different conclusion and state that there were twenty-seven droughts during this period. However, they only tabulated years where drought occurred without also subtracting excessive moisture during those same years (they also did not exclude those years with no change in temperature greater than 1.0°C). Nikolai M. Dronin and Edward G. Bellinger, *Climate Dependence and Food Problems in Russia, 1900–1990: The Interaction of Climate and Agricultural Policy and Their Effect on Food Problems*, New York, 2005, p. 7.

<sup>21</sup> In order of severity these were 1981 (51%), 1936 (50%), 1975 (49%), 1891 (45%) and 1972 (43%).

<sup>22</sup> For a scientific assessment, see Dronin and Bellinger, *Climate Dependence*, pp. 6–7; Alexander D. Kleschenko, Erodi K. Zoidze, and Vijendra K. Boken, 'Monitoring Agricultural Drought in Russia', in Vijendra K. Boken, Arthur P. Cracknell and Ronald L. Heathcote (eds), *Monitoring and Predicting Agricultural Drought: A Global Study*, New York, 2005, pp. 198–99; C. Oikonomou, H. A. Flocas, M. Hatzaki, A. Nisantzi, and D. N. Asimakopoulos, 'Relationship of Extreme Dry Spells in Eastern Mediterranean with Large-Scale Circulation', *Theoretical and Applied Climatology*, 100, 2010, pp. 143–44; G. M. MacDonald, R. A. Case, and J. M. Szeicz, 'A 538-Year Record of Climate and Treeline Dynamics from the Lower Lena River Region of Northern Siberia, Russia', *Arctic and Alpine Research*, 30, 1998, 4, pp. 334–39; P. D. Jones, T. M. L. Wigley and P. B. Wright, 'Global Temperature Variations between 1861 and 1984', *Nature*, 322, 1986, pp. 430–34.



The dry autumn [...], the snowless winter and, finally, the dry spring turned the top layer of [...] earth partly into a dry dust, [and] partly into a fine-grained, crumbly, powder, which, with the onset of strong storms in April, lost their hold, and were raised up in whole clouds, concealing the sun's rays and turning day into night. Witnesses unanimously testified that the phenomenon had such a dreadful and frightening character that everyone expected 'the end of the world'.<sup>23</sup>

Zemyatchenskii went on to describe how many crops were killed as newly germinating seeds were blown away in the harsh winds, leaving large areas without any vegetation at all. During the dust storms it was impossible to go outside and trains bearing emergency relief were slowed or even halted by drifts of earth blocking the tracks. In 1891 the harvest of the two principal cereal crops, rye and wheat, had been reduced respectively to 63 per cent and 79 per cent of normal.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, as a result of demand, the price of cereal crops increased at the very time they were needed most. According to government data assembled by Paul Gregory, the price of rye (the principal food supply for the peasants) averaged 0.65 rubles per pud between 1885–90 and increased 63 per cent to 1.04 rubles per pud in 1891.<sup>25</sup> Despite this (or, perhaps, because of it) a ban on the export of cereal crops was not issued until 2 November 1891, six months after famine conditions were first brought to the attention of the Ministry of Finance.<sup>26</sup> To make matters worse, crisis conditions brought out the worst excesses of the market. The withholding of grain for higher prices by some merchants was followed by outright fraud in others:

[I]n numerous cases dealers, after receiving exorbitant prices for their grain, sent to the famine-stricken provinces bags, the contents of which were mostly grass, sand, and bran. A limited quantity of maize was placed in each bag after it had been thoroughly slaked in water to increase its bulk. These bags caught fire through spontaneous combustion while en route to their destination, and most of them were destroyed. Enough were

<sup>23</sup> Piotr Zemyatchenskii, 'Velikoanadol'skii uchastok', *Trudy Ekspeditsii, snaryazhennoi Lesnym Departmentom, pod rukovodstvom professora Dokuchaeva, Nauchnii otdel*, 1, 1894, 3, p. 15, cited in David Moon, 'The Environmental History of the Russian Steppes: Vasilii Dokuchaev and the Harvest Failure of 1891', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 15, 2005, pp. 149–74 (p. 158).

<sup>24</sup> Simms, 'The Crop Failure of 1891', p. 237.

<sup>25</sup> A pud was a Russian unit of mass equal to 40 funt, or about 16.38 kilograms. The system extended from the twelfth century until 1924. Gregory, *Russian National Income*, p. 234.

<sup>26</sup> 'The Famine in Russia', *New York Times*, 2 November, 1891.



left, however, to reveal the swindle the dealers intended to perpetrate on the buyers of the grain.<sup>27</sup>

Ultimately, according to Russian government statistics, more than eleven million people required emergency food aid during the height of the crisis and almost 150 million rubles were expended to finance food and seed for provincial governments in the affected area.<sup>28</sup>

Reliable figures on mortality during the famine are difficult to calculate given that Imperial Russia's first nationwide census was not conducted until 1897. Nevertheless, provincial governments took their own regional censuses and estimates can be made from these figures. According to the official census of 1897 the empire had 129,211,113 inhabitants (94,188,750 of whom lived in European Russia). From an estimate of 52,797,685 in European Russia as of 1851, this would indicate a population growth rate of 1.27 per cent per year and a population of about 87,467,000 in 1891.<sup>29</sup> In his overview of mortality rates in the fifty provinces of European Russia, K. David Patterson shows that between 1867 and 1912 the peak year for deaths was 1892.<sup>30</sup> The average mortality between 1870 and 1900 (excluding the famine years) was 2.95 million. 3.6 million deaths are recorded in 1892, an increase of 650,000 above the average. 650,000 deaths is the same figure that A. M. Anfimov came to in 1960.<sup>31</sup> However, Robbins questions this number as it represents a nationwide total and it remains unclear how the famine would have directly impacted people outside the affected area. Within the famine area Robbins estimates 406,000 excess deaths as a direct result of the crop failure.<sup>32</sup> This figure includes the deaths from the cholera outbreak that arrived in the summer of 1892 but is still almost certainly low since not all deaths would have been recorded during the crisis.

That Robbins underestimates famine mortality is supported by the reduced birth rate that same year and the likelihood of increased infant mortality (much of which would not have been registered as famine deaths). Based on official figures, the number of births in European Russia

<sup>27</sup> 'The Famine in Russia - Little Sympathy Shown By St. Petersburg's Rich Merchants', *New York Times*, 23 December, 1891.

<sup>28</sup> Robbins, *Famine in Russia*, pp. 168-69.

<sup>29</sup> Based on data published in Peter Kropotkin, 'The Population of Russia', *The Geographical Journal*, 10, 1897, 2, pp. 196-202.

<sup>30</sup> Patterson, 'Mortality', p. 182.

<sup>31</sup> Andrey M. Anfimov, 'Prodovol'stvennye dolgi kak pokazatel' ekonomicheskogo polozheniia krest'ianstva dorevoliutsionnoi Rossii: Konets XIX-nachalo XX veka', *Materialy po istorii sel'skogo khoziaistva i krest'ianstva SSSR*, 4, Moscow, 1960, p. 294.

<sup>32</sup> Robbins, *Famine in Russia*, pp. 170-71.



declined by about 100,000 between 1890 and 1893.<sup>33</sup> Part of this decline would have been the result of reproductive failure and the suppression of ovarian function due to stress and poor nutrition.<sup>34</sup> However, a significant number of miscarriages and stillbirths, as well as early childhood mortality (occurring before the birth could be registered) would also be expected. This is supported by demographic data from the parish of Borshevka in Tambov province.<sup>35</sup> Out of an estimated ninety-two deaths in Borshevka in 1891 there were fifty-eight as the result of childhood infectious diseases (eight times more than in the previous year) in a population of about 1,980 people.<sup>36</sup> In this province 44 per cent of all recorded childhood deaths during the famine were one year old or younger. This suggests that famine conditions were hardest on young children, most likely due to the inability of mothers to nurse or because of weaning too early. Ergotism and alimentary toxic aleikiia, diseases caused from grain infected by fungi, would also have affected infants at a higher rate since the lethal alkaloids could be transferred through mother's milk.<sup>37</sup> Based on this, a reasonable middle ground would be to estimate 500,000 famine deaths as a baseline mortality figure. This would have been a 17 per cent increase on the average mortality rate nationwide and represents approximately 0.6 per cent of the total population in European Russia.

However, the enormous size of Imperial Russia distorts the impact of the famine when looked at nationally. Of the estimated 400,000 deaths that Robbins attributed to the famine, half of these occurred in just four neighbouring provinces: Samara, Saratov, Ufa and Voronezh. Proportional to the regional population, the impact on these provinces was four times what it was at the national level and the death rate was 58 per cent above average (more than three times the national rate). There was a total of nine provinces in the same area whose death rate increased by more than 25 per cent and, in those provinces alone, an estimated 327,767 people died.<sup>38</sup> This

<sup>33</sup> Patterson, 'Mortality', p. 182.

<sup>34</sup> Grazyna Jasienska and Peter T. Ellison, 'Physical Work Causes Suppression of Ovarian Function in Women', *Proceedings of the Royal Society of London: Biological Sciences*, 265, 1998, pp. 1847-51; Robert J. Edelman and S. Golombok, 'Stress and Reproductive Failure', *Journal of Reproductive and Infant Psychology*, 7, 2, 1989, pp. 79-86.

<sup>35</sup> S. L. Hoch, 'Famine, Disease, and Mortality Patterns in the Parish of Borshevka, Russia, 1830-1912', *Population Studies*, 52, 1998, 3, pp. 357-68.

<sup>36</sup> The population was estimated to have 1,470 people in 1864 and expanded to 2,440 in 1911, resulting in an average growth rate of 1.1% per year. This would make the population of Borshevka approximately 1,980 in 1891. Hoch, 'Famine, Disease, and Mortality', pp. 358-59.

<sup>37</sup> M. K. Matossian, 'Climate, Crops, and Natural Increase in Rural Russia, 1861-1913', *Slavic Review*, 45, 1986, 3, pp. 457-69.

<sup>38</sup> Population figures from the nine provinces that had an increased death rate by 25%



suggests that, in order to understand the factors that caused the famine, conditions need to be viewed from a regional rather than a national perspective.

*A regional perspective and Russia's demographic shift*

Not coincidentally, those provinces most affected by the famine were also the ones that had a lower standard of living. The nine provinces that had an increased death rate during the famine of 25 per cent or higher were clustered in two economic zones that Soviet economist L. E. Mints referred to as the Central Agricultural and the Eastern Agricultural Regions (see Table 1 below).<sup>39</sup> There are fourteen provinces in the Central and Eastern Agricultural Regions (CEAR) and all of them, with the exception of Astrakhan,<sup>40</sup> experienced a greater than normal mortality rate while only three of the affected provinces were not in the CEAR (Tula, Riazan', and Nizhnii Novgorod). Table 1 shows that the provinces most affected by famine were also those with the highest overall death rates. Ranked by ordinal categories based on average deaths each year (1 being a death rate of 15–20 per thousand and 7 being a rate of 45–50 per thousand) the table shows that there was an overall reduction in the average death rate throughout Imperial Russia between 1871 and 1910. The median value nationwide was 35–40 deaths per thousand between 1871 and 1875. This decreased to 30–35 per thousand between 1886 and 1900 and to 25–30 per thousand between 1906 and 1910. While the general trend for the nation was downwards, in the CEAR the death rates remained constant at 35–40

or more. Data from 1897 census and adjusted for population growth rate by province: Samara: 2,761,851 (at 1.62% = 2,508,326); Saratov: 2,419,756 (at 1.13% = 2,262,283); Ufa: 2,219,838 (at 1.84% = 1,988,961); Voronezh: 2,547,320 (at 0.98% = 2,403,165); Orenburg: 1,608,388 (at 1.86% = 1,440,093); Simbirsk: 1,550,458 (at 0.91% = 1,468,847); Kazan': 2,190,075 (at 1.06% = 2,055,607); Penza: 1,483,948 (at 0.74% = 1,419,963); Tambov: 2,715,265 (at 1.07% = 2,547,765) for a total population of 18,095,010. Based on data published in Kropotkin, 'The Population of Russia', pp. 196–202.

<sup>39</sup> L. E. Mints, *Otkhod krest'ianskogo naseleniia na zarabotki v SSSR*, Moscow, 1925. This demographic breakdown into economic regions has been followed by contemporary scholars, e.g. Burds, *Peasant Dreams and Market Politics*; Richard Burton Miller, *Rural Unrest During the First Russian Revolution: Kursk Province, 1905–1906*, Budapest, 2013; Boris Mironov, *The Standard of Living and Revolutions in Russia, 1700–1917*, London, 2012; Barbara Alpern Engel, *Between the Fields and the City: Women, Work, and Family in Russia, 1861–1914*, Cambridge, 1996.

<sup>40</sup> In the summer of 1892 Astrakhan suffered a 96% increased death rate from the cholera outbreak. Part of the increased mortality was due to overcrowding because of an influx of famine refugees. S. G. Wheatcroft, 'The 1891–92 Famine in Russia: Towards a More Detailed Analysis of its Scale and Demographic Significance', in L. Edmondson, L. and P. Waldron (eds), *Economy and Society in Russia and the Soviet Union, 1860–1930*, London, 1992, p. 56.



per thousand between 1871 and 1900 and these two Regions had the only provinces whose death rates actually increased.<sup>41</sup> This was at the same time that the CEAR was growing in population at an annual rate of 1.4 per cent.<sup>42</sup> This suggests that the famine exaggerated conditions that had been endemic for decades. Since it was those provinces furthest from the industrial centre — extending in a strip from Astrakhan in the south to Perm' in the north-east — that continued to bear the highest proportion of deaths as late as 1910, it is reasonable to conclude that those provinces most affected by the famine were also those that Russian development had left behind.

Table 1. Famine deaths, per cent increase in famine deaths, and median death rate by province<sup>43</sup>

Regions, Subregions & Provinces	Famine Deaths	Famine % >	Deaths/1000 1871-1875	Deaths/1000 1886-1900	Deaths/1000 1906-1910
Imperial Russia	~ 500,000	17%	5	4	3
<b>I. Nonagricultural/Industrial</b>			5	4	3
A. <i>North and Northwest</i>			4	3	3
1. Arkhangel'sk			3	3	3
2. Vologda			4	4	4
3. Olonets			5	5	5
4. St Petersburg			5	3	3
5. Novgorod			4	4	3
6. Pskov			5	4	3
7. Smolensk			6	5	3
8. Tver'			5	4	4
9. Kovno			2	2	2
10. Kurland			1	1	1
11. Vilna			3	3	1
12. Livonia			2	2	1
13. Estland			2	2	1
B. <i>Central Industrial</i>			5.5	5	4
14. Iaroslavl'			5	4	3
15. Moscow			7	5	4
16. Vladimir			6	6	3

<sup>41</sup> The one exception is Don oblast. This province neighbours Astrakhan to the west and is the only province that saw a death rate of 45-50 per thousand between 1906 and 1910. In many respects it would more appropriately be classified as a province of the Central Agricultural Region but I will follow Burds in leaving it as Southern Agricultural. See Burds, *Peasant Dreams and Market Politics*, p. 22.

<sup>42</sup> Based on data published by Kropotkin, 'The Population of Russia', pp. 196-202.

<sup>43</sup> Regions and subregions from Mints, *Otkhod krest'ianskogo*, pp. 22-24. Mortality rate from Patterson, 'Mortality'. Provincial famine deaths and increased mortality from Robbins, *Famine in Russia*, pp. 188-89.

Throughout the 1870s and 1880s the top priority for Russian economic planners was industrialization. According to economic historian Olga Crisp, Russia suffered throughout the nineteenth century from 'chronic budgetary deficits, despite increased taxation, and recourse to the printing press and foreign loans'.<sup>44</sup> Beginning with Finance Ministers Mikhail Reutern and Nikolai Bunge in the 1870s and 1880s, and continuing through to Ivan Vyshnegradskii and Sergei Witte in the 1890s, the emphasis was to attract foreign investment and expand industrial production:

To create a favourable balance of payments, to expand exports and keep down imports and other expenditure abroad, to attract gold into the country and to direct this gold into the treasury became the guiding, all-pervading objective of [Russian financial] policy.<sup>45</sup>

According to John P. McKay the policies of this period focused on the development of a market economy with a limited role for the state, other than to help create adequate demand in a weak private market. With the exception of state-owned railroads, 'almost all Russian industry remained in private hands. Almost all increase in industrial output came from private enterprise producing for profit within a relatively free market system'.<sup>46</sup> However, the economy was by no means independent from the state as the share of government in consumption is estimated to have been 7.5 per cent.<sup>47</sup> But with mounting government expenditures from their imperial foreign policy and heavy indebtedness to France, Russian Finance Ministers were looking towards a transition from an emphasis on agricultural production to industrial production.<sup>48</sup> Between 1883 and 1897 the percentage of national income from agriculture declined by 6.1 per cent while, during the same period, the percentage from industry increased

<sup>44</sup> Crisp, *Studies in the Russian Economy*, p. 100.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid. In this passage Crisp was speaking specifically of Vyshnegradskii. However she points out that his term as Finance Minister only differed from those of Reutern and Bunge where it came to monetary policy and 'the desirability of restoring the paper rouble to par'.

<sup>46</sup> McKay, *Pioneers for Profit*, p. 8.

<sup>47</sup> N. Spulber, *Russia's Economic Transitions: From Late Tsarism to the New Millennium*, Cambridge, 2003, p. 147.

<sup>48</sup> In 1891 the largest portions of the state budget after expenditures on goods and services (569 million rubles) were defence expenditures (296 million rubles) and the interest and principal payments on government debt (257 million rubles). This latter figure was ten times the amount spent on education and health nationwide. Gregory, *Russian National Income*, p. 252.



by 7.2 per cent.<sup>49</sup> This reflected the rapid industrialization taking place and, beginning in 1883, Russia's economic growth exceeded that of most European countries and was comparable to that of the United States.<sup>50</sup> During this period the number of private corporations increased five-fold from just 554 in 1870 to 2,973 in 1892 with corporate capital increasing by 70 per cent to 614 million rubles per year.<sup>51</sup> In the last decade of the nineteenth century Russia appeared to be on track to become one of the economic powerhouses of Europe.

However, this rapid industrialization led to a disruption in the traditional agricultural existence for many rural provinces in European Russia. By the 1890s an estimated six million peasants relied on labour migration to supplement their income from the short and unpredictable growing seasons. This migration was highest in the Nonagricultural/Industrial Region (NAIR) and clustered in the eight provinces of the Central Industrial subregion.<sup>52</sup> For example, in the province of Moscow nearly one-third of all peasants and at least one member of every peasant household received passports in order to engage in work that took them away from their villages for extended periods each year.<sup>53</sup> The proportion of passports issued to the local peasant population in the NAIR more than doubled from 5.0 per cent in the 1860s to 11.7 per cent in the 1880s. By 1910 this proportion had increased to 17.1 per cent.<sup>54</sup> This suggests that labour migration, both for agricultural work and to the growing industrial zone, played an increasingly important role in the NAIR's economy. In contrast, the proportion of passports issued in the CEAR went from 1.4 per cent in the 1860s to 6.2 per cent in the 1880s and 7.9 per cent by 1910. In summarizing his analysis, Jeffrey Burds writes that 'the number of issued passports grew in inverse proportion to the distance from the center, with the percentage of issued passports declining in definite concentric rings as

<sup>49</sup> National income from agriculture declined from 57.4% between 1883–87 to 51.3% between 1897–1901, while that from industry increased from 23.4% to 30.6%. During this period agriculture had an annual growth rate of 2.55% while the industrial growth rate was more than twice that at 5.45%. P. R. Gregory, *Before Command: An Economic History of Russia from Emancipation to the First Five-Year Plan*, Princeton, NJ, 1994, p. 30.

<sup>50</sup> Russian growth rate of total product was 3.25% per year compared to 3.5% in the US, 2.6% in Germany, 2.1% in Great Britain, and 1.5% in France. Russia's per capita product of 1.65% exceeded that of Western Europe and the United States at 1.6%. *Ibid.*, pp. 24–25.

<sup>51</sup> T. C. Owen, *Russian Corporate Capitalism from Peter the Great to Perestroika*, New York, 1995, p. 191.

<sup>52</sup> These include Iaroslavl', Moscow, Vladimir, Kostroma, Kaluga, Nizhnii Novgorod, Tula and Riazan'. Mints, *Otkhod krest'ianskogo*, pp. 22–24.

<sup>53</sup> Burds, *Peasant Dreams and Market Politics*, p. 24.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

one moved away from Moscow'.<sup>55</sup> This is consistent with Lenin's argument, written in 1893, that an increasing number of peasants were only able to meet their total needs by selling their labour.<sup>56</sup>

This supplementary income as the result of labour migration may have had a direct impact on the overall death rate in European Russia. Figures 1a and 1b highlight the importance this had on the NAIR compared to the CEAR. In the 1870s the median death rate for the NAIR was 35–40 deaths per thousand (see Table 1). At the same time, the mean migration rate for provinces in the NAIR (based on the proportion of passports issued by population) was 11.0 per cent. While the death rate decreased from 35–40 deaths per thousand in the 1870s to 25–30 per thousand in the 1900s, the migration rate increased from 11.0 per cent in the 1870s to 17.1 per cent in the 1900s. The NAIR showed a decrease in the median death rate that corresponded with a rise in the migration rate. In contrast, the CEAR showed no change in their median death rate during the same period and an increase in the mean migration rate by less than 3 per cent (from 5.1 to 7.9).

That industrial labour migration played a substantial role in the rural economy of European Russia at this time is further suggested by the passport terms that peasants received. Between 1881 and 1890 provinces in the Central Industrial subregion of the NAIR were roughly divided between passports for terms of 1–3 months (38.5 per cent), 6 months (34.2 per cent), and 12 months (27.3 per cent). This represents the year-round employment that industrial jobs had to offer. In contrast, provinces in the CEAR emphasized short-term passports in accordance with agricultural labour (1–3 months: 67.6 per cent; 6 months: 19.6 per cent; 12 months: 12.8 per cent).<sup>57</sup> As this analysis indicates, a demographic shift developed during this period of rapid industrialization. While the rural provinces in the NAIR had the benefit of proximity to the rising industrialization of Imperial Russia, those in the CEAR were too far removed.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 21.

<sup>56</sup> Vladimir I. Lenin, 'On the So-Called Market Question', in *Collected Works*, 1, Moscow, 1963, p. 123.

<sup>57</sup> Burds, *Peasant Dreams and Market Politics*, pp. 60–61.



However, even though peasants in the SAR engaged in agricultural labour at the same rate as those in the CEAR, they retained their wheat commodity and were even able to sell at a price 17 per cent higher than average. They had no reduction, and perhaps even an improvement, in their maximum food entitlement. Peasants in the NAIR experienced a reduction in their maximum entitlement as a result of the increased grain prices, but their labour commodity was such that they could still afford the equivalent of 20 kg of rye per day. The CEAR had neither of these advantages since, for them, their commodity *was* their food entitlement. As the regional breakdown indicates, the problem was not simply a problem of food availability, but a failure of food entitlements for peasants living in the CEAR.

In the final analysis, the Malthusian explanation does not address many of the key factors that contributed to famine conditions. Despite the crop failure the amount of grain in the marketplace actually increased, but the high cost put it out of reach for those who were most affected. Provinces that were within proximity to industrial development (i.e. the Central Industrial subregion) were able to supplement their agricultural income through labour migration and improve their maximum entitlement. The provinces in the SAR had no significant loss in their primary commodity and were therefore largely unaffected by the crisis. It was provinces in the CEAR that suffered the brunt of the disaster. Rather than simply a 'dreadful resource of nature', the famine was caused by a failure in entitlements that allowed some to have the means for survival while, for those who had been left behind decades earlier, there was no recourse available. In this way the crisis merely exposed the already-existing fault lines of economic inequality and, by understanding the demographic causes of the famine, we can better understand the conditions that ultimately led to the downfall of tsarism in Russia.

Malthusian  
explanation

*Conclusion: The beginning of the end for tsarist Russia?*

The Malthusian explanation for the famine breaks down still further when it is considered how the crisis galvanized concerted opposition to the tsarist regime. Simms dismisses the claim that radical movements could have been motivated by an event that, he says, was 'caused exclusively by bad weather':

The articulate political Left in Russia used this gloomy picture to advantage in its criticism of the imperial regime. [...] To the detriment of



their political analyses, Marxists, Populists, and liberals of all persuasions were unable to overcome their overt political biases in assessing the causes, results, and consequences of the crop failure and famine of 1891–92.<sup>74</sup>

There is, however, ample evidence suggesting that the desperate circumstances experienced by millions of peasants across European Russia exposed a new generation to the systemic inequality that existed in the country. As Paul Avrich writes:

The great famine of 1891 stimulated the growth of [radical] organizations, and throughout Russia they multiplied very rapidly, becoming the nuclei around which the two major socialist parties — the Marxian Social Democrats and the neo-Populist Socialist Revolutionaries — took shape at the end of the century.<sup>75</sup>

Those who had long been opposed to the tsar's government saw the crisis as fresh motivation to push for revolutionary change. Appealing to the world from his exile in London, Petr Kropotkin wrote in the wake of the famine that 'there is not the slightest doubt that the feeling which now dominates in Russia is the need of a deep, thorough, and sincere revision of all the most fundamental conditions of existence of the nation'.<sup>76</sup> Vladimir Il'ich Lenin, having just finished his law degree at St Petersburg University, returned home to Volga province at the height of the crisis. His revolutionary fervour grew daily as his caseload was dominated by petty crimes from famine victims, including that of a man sentenced to Siberia for stealing turnips.<sup>77</sup> A large corps of volunteers, mostly students, journeyed to the famine-stricken area to assist the survivors and, in the process, experienced first-hand the deprivations of the countryside. The radical intelligentsia used the crisis to publish pamphlets and give speeches to the poor on the role of the government in causing the crisis, often suffering arrest for their efforts.<sup>78</sup> Maureen Perrie writes, 'Historians of the

<sup>74</sup> Simms, 'The Crop Failure of 1891', p. 238.

<sup>75</sup> Paul Avrich, *The Russian Anarchists*, Princeton, NJ, 1967, p. 17.

<sup>76</sup> Peter Kropotkin, 'The Present Condition in Russia', *The Nineteenth Century*, 5, 1895, 38, p. 519. In Geneva, the Armenian-born doctor, Aleksandr Atabekian, and a group of Russian students were stirred into action by the famine and began smuggling Kropotkin's writings into the country. Avrich, *The Russian Anarchists*, p. 38.

<sup>77</sup> His only acquittals were those of two thirteen-year-old boys. C. Hill, *Lenin and the Russian Revolution*, London, 1947, p. 34.

<sup>78</sup> M. Perrie, *The Agrarian Policy of the Russian Socialist-Revolutionary Party: From its Origins through the Revolution of 1905–1907*, Cambridge, 1976, pp. 6–9.



Socialist-Revolutionary movement see the famine year of 1891 as a crucial date for the revival of revolutionary Populism'. The innumerable small acts of resistance, the questioning of governmental authority, the interactions between radicals from the city and the rural poor, all 'contributed to a revival of the urban revolutionary movement'.<sup>79</sup> Robert Service agrees:

They [the Russian radicals] saw the famine as a ghastly indication of the regime's ineptitude and brutality; they argued, too, that the whole country had been brought into disrepute across Europe. Handouts of food were inadequate. The hospitals were filthy and too few. The civil bureaucracy was extremely slow to react. Marxists, agrarian socialists and liberals concurred that tsarism's rotten heart had been exposed.<sup>80</sup>

While many critics blamed the regime for mishandling their response to the famine, rather than systemic institutional factors that were harder to identify, this radical activity presupposes a mass movement underway that was responding to conditions on the ground. After all, Russia was no stranger to drought conditions and it is unreasonable to assume 'political bias' when a growing mass movement coalesces around small, marginalized organizations in the wake of a crisis.

The Russian harvest failure of 1891 may have been precipitated by a natural disaster but the resulting famine was man-made. In contrast to the Malthusian explanation, the preconditions for the tragedy were forged through institutional inequality and regional specialization that resulted in an entitlement failure costing half a million lives. Yet, despite this, Russia succeeded in establishing a favourable balance of trade and, by 1897, had achieved that ultimate prize of joining the gold standard. Eight years later the instability became too acute and the government began its fall. The conditions that gave rise to the famine had existed for decades but went largely ignored due to the Russian leadership's exclusive focus on the national economy. The famine ultimately revealed the fault lines of inequality that had long existed and were allowed to fester. In the tripartite economy that developed as Russia moved towards a capitalist system, it was the third tier — the Central/Eastern Agricultural Region — that ultimately proved most unstable. When that tier fell during the famine of 1891 it initiated a process that eventually took the rest of the country with it.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>80</sup> Robert Service, *Lenin: A Biography*, Cambridge, 2000, p. 87.