

Context Note: the fate of Ukraine's rural migrants in the cities

In the winter of 1932, Moscow closed the borders of Ukraine and the Kuban to stop the rapidly increasing numbers of farm families from leaving in search of food. The Soviet authorities had ordered repeated grain requisitions that had left farmers, including those who had joined the collective farms, with no reserves, and further punished farmers for failing to meet unrealistic grain requisition targets by seizing additional or all foodstuffs from their homes. Those fleeing the countryside were apprehended at the borders and either arrested and deported or sent back to die in their villages.

Moreover, a new system of internal passports, instituted in 1932 and expanded in 1933, restricted travel from villages in Ukraine to the cities and mandated residency registration in the cities. Even so, desperate, starving rural residents – stripped of their last food reserves, continued to turn to the major urban and industrial centers of Ukraine as their last hope.

Formidable obstacles awaited rural residents in a large, overcrowded city such as Kharkiv, whose population had nearly doubled between 1920 and 1933. It was now against the law for Ukraine's rural population to take up residence in the cities, and as illegals without close family or friends in the city, it would be almost impossible to find a place to stay. Most ended up sleeping and congregating in vacant lots or simply along the streets and sidewalks. The weakened, impoverished migrants living in unsanitary conditions were susceptible to diseases, often fatal, carried by lice or caused by unclean drinking water.

Rural residents were not entitled to the food ration coupons of city workers; therefore, they could not access the city's primary sources of food, however inadequate. Having traded their last possessions for bread, with no work or shelter, and too weak to return to their villages to die, many of Ukraine's once proud farming families succumbed to slow death from disease and starvation on the streets of urban Ukraine.

Sources:

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