

## **Context Note: Availability and access to food in urban and industrial areas**

With the introduction of the first Five-Year Plan in 1928, previously existing systems of food distribution and access collapsed in the Soviet Union. Collectivization was not only an enormous human catastrophe in Ukraine, but an economic policy failure that failed to meet the needs of the rapidly expanding non-agricultural workforce (the proletariat) and could not compensate for the virtual shutdown of private trading.

A hierarchy of food rationing became the norm everywhere in the USSR by 1930. Those permitted to have ration cards could purchase a narrow range of food staples at relatively low prices in designated stores. Ration allotments were based on location in the Soviet Union and rankings within the proletariat. Employment and locations in the USSR were ranked according to their level of importance as assigned by the Soviet state in Moscow. The uppermost elite in the Communist Party and the military had essentially unlimited access to the food supply; the great majority of Ukraine's population - farmers, their families and most other rural residents were not permitted ration cards at all.

In urban areas, the ration card was the first line of defense for survival in the 1929-1934 period. Those without cards had to survive on purchase or barter at the open markets, which sold often inferior goods at prices as much as ten times higher than those in the state centers. Although officially illegal and often raided, the markets thrived as the primary and sometimes only option for those without cards and were also used by those seeking to buy more than their cards could purchase.

As conditions worsened in the early 1930s, the official rations were seldom obtainable. Survivors frequently mentioned waiting hours in line for a ration of bread or flour, only to leave empty handed. Other goods, such as eggs, meat, or sugar, disappeared almost completely.

Workers with access to an on-site cafeteria found that the portions served became smaller. The difference between the rank of one employee and another could mean simply a potato added to a bowl of thin soup. Factories and individual workers who had the good fortune of having a bit of land next to their dwelling were encouraged to grow their own vegetables. While the ownership of a goat or chickens was permitted on urban peripheries, one would have to find a means to feed them.

In 1933, the small number of state-run commercial stores selling goods for rubles multiplied into the hundreds in Ukraine as hunger-driven workers attempted to supplement their diminishing ration allotments. This exploitative tendency was even more pronounced with the Torgsin, state-owned foreign currency shops originally designed for foreign consultants and visitors. When the Torgsin stores were opened to local citizens, starving, desperate non-wage earners -- primarily farmers and collective farm workers -- traded their valuables such as gold crosses and family heirlooms for perhaps a small sack of flour, which no doubt they realized

was made from grain that the authorities had seized from them earlier. The number of these Torgsin shops and the volume of their business increased dramatically in 1933, most notably in Ukraine.

For further information on Torgsin, see PD135: <http://vitacollections.ca/HREC-holodomorphotodirectory/3636331/data>

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