

Context Note: Starving rural migrants and urban residents in Ukraine

In order to divert blame for its gross mismanagement and inability to meet the needs of the expanding non-agricultural working class (the proletariat), Stalin's regime took full advantage of its state-run media and mass rallies to demonize the rural population as greedy, lazy, selfish, and unwilling to put the needs of the Soviet state first. The authorities also portrayed collective farm managers as being under the influence of foreign saboteurs and other "enemies of the people." And even as food shortages worsened in the early 1930s, the Soviet state continued to sell grain and other food products abroad and also held significant quantities of grain in strategic reserves – all the while blaming the rural population for food scarcity at home.

No opposition groups or parties or non-state media were allowed that could have debunked the false attacks, and the urban population was primed to scapegoat the countryside for their increasingly hungry and impoverished existence.

In the meantime, desperate, starving farm families – unable to meet unrealistic grain requisition targets and subject to searches of their homes and seizures of even their emergency food supplies – continued to turn to urban and industrial centers as their last hope. They came in spite of new restrictions on travel and mandated residency registration that made it illegal for Ukrainians from the countryside to move to the cities - often congregating and sleeping in vacant lots or simply along city streets.

Rural residents were not allowed to receive the food ration coupons that city residents were entitled to and therefore had no access to the city's primary food sources, inadequate as they were. Few could find work. With nothing to trade for bread in the markets or Torgsin (see: <http://vitacollections.ca/HREC-holodomorphotodirectory/3636331/data>), countless Ukrainian farmers and their families succumbed to slow death from disease and starvation on the streets of Ukraine's cities.

Many city residents had family in the countryside and knew that the propaganda about the greed and laziness of the rural population was untrue. They knew that a willful, deadly famine raged in Ukraine. Overwhelmed by the number of starving migrants filling their streets and impoverished and hungry themselves, many tried to help in small, individual ways, but there was little they could do. The urban population portrayed in these photos may appear unheeding or uncaring, but we can only imagine the range of emotions they experienced.

Sources:

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Survivor testimony: e.g. the Diary of Oleksandra Radchenko: "Щоденник Учительки Олександри Радченко." In *Репресовані Щоденники. Голодомор 1932–1933 років в Україні*, 31–113. Український інститут національної пам'яті. Київ: Фенікс, 2018.