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'The Soviet Great Famine, 1932-33'

This paper investigates the causes of the Soviet Great Famine, 1932–33. Ethnic minorities, such as Ukrainians, suffered higher excess mortality rates than the Russian majority. Existing explanations can be broadly categorized into two groups. The first blames Soviet economic policies, which together with bad weather reduced grain production in 1931 and 1932, and caused over-procurement of food from the peasants. This view implies that Ukrainians suffered disproportionately because they lived in places that were unfortunately struck with weather shocks and/or in places that were more agriculturally productive, and thus subject to Soviet agricultural policies. The second ascribes an intent of Soviet policy to target Ukrainians in order to increase political and, perhaps, ethnic homogenization of the newly established U.S.S.R.

The main challenge in distinguishing between the two views was the limited availability of disaggregated data for rigorous empirical analysis. Earlier studies rely on narrative and descriptive evidence. We collect a vast amount of archival and published data to construct novel province and district-level panels on mortality, policy outcomes and natural conditions. To the best of our knowledge, we are the first to construct such comprehensive and granular panel data for the Soviet Union. These data allow us to conduct rigorous empirical analysis and distinguish between the prevailing hypotheses by controlling for confounding factors and exploring a rich set of heterogeneous treatment effects.

We document several new empirical facts. First, excess mortality was much higher in regions with a higher share of ethnic Ukrainians, even outside of the Soviet Republic of Ukraine. Second, this cannot be explained by differences in natural conditions, grain productivity, demographic structure or urbanization. Third, in regions with a higher share of ethnic Ukrainians, Soviet economic policies were implemented more zealously, which resulted in higher food procurement and famine mortality. Fourth, there is suggestive evidence that mortality was exacerbated by the presence of non-ethnic Ukrainian Communist Party bureaucrats. These and other results in the paper provide novel evidence for the presence of ethnic bias in famine-era Soviet policies and the contribution of ethnic bias to famine mortality.