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‘A Trial of Strength against the Restive Peasantry’: What the Germans Knew about the Great Famine in the USSR and How They Perceived It

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Based on a study of German records—mostly but not exclusively diplomatic dispatches from the USSR—the paper investigates how both German state and non-state actors perceived the Soviet Famines of 1931–33. It first analyzes how information about the famine received through the German diplomatic network in the USSR was spread among the German population. In this context it touches upon the history of the relief operation Brethren in Need, set up by German political and religious institutions to help starving ethnic Germans. The paper then examines the cultural patterns that shaped the way Germans diplomats perceived and made sense of the famines. Finally it inquiries into the lasting effects that this knowledge of the Soviet famines had on the Germans.

Keywords: Soviet famines, Soviet collectivization, National Socialism, ethnic Germans, German foreign policy.

Publications of non-Soviet documents on the Great Famine are a genre in its own right with a fairly long tradition. The first round of published collections of documents, including British, Italian, and German diplomatic reports, appeared before 1990.¹ Foreign diplomatic reports were particularly precious for historians at that time, as most Soviet sources were still inaccessible to scholars. In the 1990s, after the collapse of the USSR and the archival revolution that followed, further publications of this kind made Polish, Romanian, and Vatican records known to the wider public.² The vitality of the genre, even after the opening of the Soviet archives and the possibility of accessing "direct evidence," attests to the persisting relevance of these kinds of documents. There are several reasons for this. As I will show in the following pages, foreign documents often contain important insights, not despite but because of their particular, non-Soviet perspective. Being neither perpetrators nor victims of the violence they saw unfolding before their eyes, foreign observers provided in many instances a more neutral view of those events. Moreover, because they were often based on first-hand information gained via alternative sources to official channels, they provide a view from below that is often absent in other kinds of sources.

The importance of foreign sources is not limited to providing information about the famine itself. In fact, they allow a different topic to be addressed, namely, how the Great Famine was perceived in other countries. Despite the increasing limitations placed on the freedom of movement of people, goods, and information in the 1930s, which amounted to a pronounced "de-globalization,"³ the Great Soviet Famines of the 1930s were a transnational phenomenon, inasmuch as foreign states and the public opinion of other countries played a role in co-determining their course. Although foreign governments were in no position to influence Soviet internal affairs directly, even if they had wanted to—by 1932–33 most countries had improved their relations with the USSR and were unwilling to put them at risk by denouncing the famine—campaigns aimed at publicizing the starving of

¹ M. Carynnyk et al., eds., *The Foreign Office and the Famine: British Documents on Ukraine and the Great Famine of 1932–1933* (Vestal, N.Y.: Limestone Press, 1988); D. Zlepko, *Der ukrainische Hunger-Holocaust* (Sonnenbühl: Verlag Helmuth Wildt, 1988); A. Graziosi, *Lettere da Kharkov: La carestia in Ucraina e nel Caucaso del Nord nei rapporti dei diplomatici italiani, 1932–33* (Turin: Einaudi, 1991), 30. Some of the documents that figure in this collection first appeared in French translation. See A. Graziosi, "Lettres de Kharkov : La famine en Ukraine et dans le Caucase du Nord à travers les rapports des diplomates italiens, 1932–1934," *Cahiers du Monde Russe* 30, nos. 1–2 (1989): 5–106.

² J. J. Bruski, *Hołodomor 1932–1933: Wielki Głód na Ukrainie w dokumentach polskiej dyplomacji i wywiadu* (Warsaw, 2008); A. D. McVay and L. Luciuk, *The Holy See and the Holodomor: Documents from the Vatican Secret Archives on the Great Famine of 1932–1933 in Soviet Ukraine* (Toronto: The Kashtan Press, 2011); A. Basciani, "From Collectivization to the Great Famine: Eyewitness Statements on the Holodomor by Refugees from the Ukrainian SSR, 1930–1933," *Holodomor Studies*, no. 3 (2011): 1–27.

³ J. Osterhammel and N. P. Petersson, *Globalization: A Short History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 99–106.

millions in the USSR were activated around the world.⁴ Moreover, relief operations on behalf of specific national or religious groups in the famine areas were initiated by political or religious organizations.⁵ Therefore, even if the Great Famine of the 1930s is a patent instance of “humanitarian non-intervention,” it did unleash a series of actions and transformations in other countries that still await a study focused on comparison and entanglements (*histoire croisée*).⁶ All these operations were, for obvious reasons, part and parcel of the tense and conflicted environment of the 1930s and were inspired by political, religious, or nationalistic agendas. They had an impact on the unfolding of the famine and the social conflict stemming from it within the Soviet Union, as foreign aid allowed many to survive the dire conditions of the famine while exposing the recipients to persecution by the Soviet authorities. Unraveling this dense web of people and organizations spanning many countries can greatly improve our understanding of the history of the interwar period. Moreover, it can enhance our understanding of how the perception of the famine and, more generally, of Stalin’s modernization affected the cultural and political history of other countries.⁷ In short, pursuing these avenues will foster the trans-nationalization of Holodomor studies by adding new lines of inquiry to the issues traditionally at the center of their interest.

The aim of this paper is to provide some insights into German sources related to the Great Famine. While a number of publications on this subject already exist,⁸

⁴ On Ewald Ammende’s activism, see S. Bamberger-Stemmann, *Der Europäische Nationalitätenkongreß 1925 bis 1938: Nationale Minderheiten zwischen Lobbyismus und Großmachtinteressen* (Marburg and Lahn: Verl. Herder-Inst., 2000); M. Housden, *On Their Own Behalf: Ewald Ammende, Europe’s National Minorities and the Campaign for Cultural Autonomy, 1920–1936* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2014); idem, “Ewald Ammende and the Organization of National Minorities in Inter-war Europe,” *German History* 18, no. 4 (2000): 439–60. On Poland, see R. Wysocki and P. Redko, “Reactions to the Famine in Poland,” *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 30, nos. 1/4 (2008): 49–67.

⁵ To date, only the history of the Mennonites has been the object of a wide number of scholarly studies. See C. Neufeldt, “Through the Fires of Hell: The Dekulakization and Collectivization of the Soviet Mennonite Community (1928–1933),” *The Journal of Mennonite Studies* 16 (1998): 9–32; idem, “Separating the Sheep from the Goats: The Role of Mennonites and Non-Mennonites in the Dekulakization of Khortitsa, Ukraine (1928–1930),” *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 83, no. 2 (April 2009): 221–91; T. Martin, *The Russian Mennonite Encounter with the Soviet State, 1917–1955* (Waterloo, Ont.: Conrad Grebel University College, 2001), 31–39. For detailed discussion of the reports sent by the German agricultural attaché Otto Auhagen, see E. Warkentin, “The Mennonites before Moscow: The Notes of Dr. Otto Auhagen,” *The Journal of Mennonite Studies* 26 (2008): 199–218.

⁶ M. Werner and B. Zimmermann, *Beyond Comparison: Histoire Croisée and the Challenge of Reflexivity, History and Theory* 45, no. 1 (February 2006): 30–50.

⁷ In this regard studies have been written on how the

⁸ A selection of German diplomatic reports on the famine was published in Zlepko, *Der ukrainische Hunger-Holocaust* (the same documents were published in Ukrainian translation by A. I. Kudriachenko, *Holodomor v Ukraïni 1932–1933 rokiv za dokumentamy politychnoho arkhivu Ministerstva zakordonnykh sprav Federatyvnoi Respubliky Nimechchyna* (Kyiv: Natsionalnyi instytut stratehichnykh doslidzhen, 2008). For an article based on German diplomatic reports, see O. Wenzel, “Holodomor: Stalins Genozid in der Ukraine 1932–1933,” in *Berichten der Deutschen Botschaft Moskau und des Generalkonsulats Charkow, Zeitschrift des Forschungsverbundes SED-Staat*, no. 27 (2010): 5–24.

in my opinion German records have not received the attention they deserve from scholars. Inasmuch as the amount and quality of information reaching Germany during the famine was hardly matched by any other major power of the time, there is still a need for a more detailed study. Apart from a few exceptions,⁹ students of Germany have shown little interest in the Great Famine, leading a German scholar to speak of a "denied intertwining."¹⁰ Even though Eastern European history is an established academic field in Germany, its contribution to the understanding of the relations between Germany and the Soviet Union has largely focused on World War II, the occupation, and the violent policies aimed at the extermination of Jews and other groups. Until the publication of the first comprehensive study on the Great Famine in 1986, namely, Robert Conquest's *The Harvest of Sorrow*, this lack of interest was not a peculiarity of Germany but rather common among non-Ukrainian historians. Following this seminal study and, even more importantly, the fall of the Soviet Union, the historiography on the Great Famine has grown markedly, becoming an established field in international scholarship. The persistent gap in German scholarship is therefore surprising in light of this relatively recent trend. The reasons for this are manifold, one of them being the fact that German historiography after 1990 has been strongly involved in the elaboration of a new national identity. As Stefan Berger has pointed out,¹¹ in post-1990 Germany there has been a clear trend toward the re-nationalization of the historical perspective, stemming from the need to redefine national identity in the light of reunification. Since the Nazi regime had exploited, in its anti-Bolshevik campaigns, the famine theme both before and during the occupation of the USSR, this subject did not seem to fit into German post-reunification identity searching and thus remained relatively understudied.¹²

In the following pages I will focus mainly on German diplomatic records. But I will also touch upon sources of a different nature that, as already mentioned,

⁹ B. Falk's dissertation on Soviet cities during the famine is one such exception. Stephan Merl, who has written several studies on the history of the peasantry in the USSR, has published a few articles on the famine. See S. Merl, "Entfachte Stalin die Hungersnot von 1932–1933 zur Auslöschung des ukrainischen Nationalismus? Anmerkungen zu neueren westlichen Veröffentlichungen über die 'ukrainische' Hungersnot," *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 37, no. 4 (1989): 569–90; idem, "War die Hungersnot von 1932–1933 eine Folge der Zwangskollektivierung der Landwirtschaft oder wurde sie bewußt im Rahmen der Nationalitätenpolitik herbeigeführt?" in G. Hausmann and A. Kappeler, eds., *Ukraine: Gegenwart und Geschichte eines neuen Staates* (Baden-Baden, 1993), 145–66.

¹⁰ G. Hausmann, *Verweigerte Verflechtung: Die ukrainische Hungersnot 1932–1933 in der deutschsprachigen Historiographie*, in Alfred Eisfeld, Guido Hausmann, and Dietmar Neutatz, eds., *Hungersnöte in Russland und in der Sowjetunion 1891–1947: Regionale, ethnische und konfessionelle Aspekte* (Essen, 2017).

¹¹ S. Berger, *The Search for Normality: National Identity and Historical Consciousness in Germany since 1800* (Oxford, 2002); idem, "A Return to the National Paradigm? National History Writing in Germany, Italy, France, and Britain from 1945 to the Present," *The Journal of Modern History* 77, no. 3 (September 2005): 629–78.

¹² G. Hausmann and T. Penter, "Instrumentalisiert, verdrängt, ignoriert: Der Holodomor im Bewusstsein der Deutschen," *Osteuropa* 70, nos. 3–4 (2020): 193–214.

played a key role in transmitting information to Germans and in shaping their perception of the famine. This contribution will address three issues:

First, the amount and quality of information that Germans had about the famine. In this context, I will look at what I call “the politics of information” about the famine conducted by the German Foreign Office (*Auswärtiges Amt*) between 1932 and 1933.

Second, the contents of diplomatic dispatches, how the German diplomatic corps made sense of the famine, and the patterns of perception that shaped their explanations.

And third, the impact that knowledge of the famine had on Germans and its possible long-lasting consequences.

I

The extent to which information from the Soviet Union reached the outside world in 1932–33 was very limited, as the Bolshevik authorities had a firm grip on the border-crossing movement of information and people, and on the circulation of foreigners within the country. In this context of general scarcity, Germany was comparatively one of the countries with the largest information network in the Soviet Union, and its public opinion had, on average, a better knowledge of Soviet internal affairs than most other countries. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that German news reports were often used as sources by the foreign press.¹³

The main reason for this lies in diplomacy. Germany was the first major power to establish relations with the Bolshevik state, with the 1922 Treaty of Rapallo. Throughout the 1920s and the early 1930s the two outsiders of the Versailles international system leveraged this special relationship, which was kept alive even in the immediate aftermath of the Nazi seizure of power, in order to raise their status in the international system. This explains why at the time of the famine Germany had seven diplomatic missions in the Soviet Union, three of which were located in Ukraine (Odesa, Kharkiv, Kyiv, Moscow, Leningrad, Novosibirsk, and Tbilisi), whereas most European states had few if any representatives outside the Soviet capital.¹⁴ German sources, however, were also varied, comprising a wide array of informants apart from diplomats—namely, ordinary citizens who maintained contacts both with institutions in Berlin and with German diplomatic proxies. In the Soviet Union there were sizeable groups of Germans, both German citizens (*Reichsdeutsche*) and so-called persons of German descent (*Deutschstämmige*)—German colonists who for the most part had settled in the Russian Empire in the eighteenth century. There are hardly any reliable statistics on the number of ethnic Germans living in the Soviet

¹³ W. Müller, “Russlandberichterstattung und Rapallopolitik: Deutsch-sowjetische Beziehungen, 1924–1933, im Spiegel der deutschen Presse” (PhD dissertation, Saarbrücken, 1983); C. Mick, *Sowjetische Propaganda, Fünfjahresplan und deutsche Russlandpolitik 1928–1932* (Stuttgart: Steiner Verlag, 1995).

¹⁴ P. Fonzi, “Non-Soviet Perspectives on the Great Famine: A Comparative Analysis of British, Italian, Polish, and German Sources,” *Nationalities Papers* 48 (May 2020): 444–59.

Union. Whereas the 1926 Soviet census registered 1.24 million ethnic Germans, the German Embassy in Moscow calculated that in 1934 this number had shrunk by one-quarter.¹⁵ As for German citizens, in 1930 there were 11,327 in the whole USSR, 5,554 of whom were in Ukraine,¹⁶ where many Germans had settled in the countryside as farmers. Although many re-emigrated under the pressure of dekulakization and collectivization, in 1935 the number of German citizens in the USSR still stood at 6,000, 2,500 of whom were in Ukraine.¹⁷

German colonists were a valuable source of regular reporting to the consulate about what was occurring in the countryside. This allowed the German diplomatic corps, unlike those of other countries, to gather precise information on developments outside cities. For instance, at the peak of the Ukrainian famine in 1933 the German Consul in Kyiv reported that approximately 50 German peasants visited the consulate every day to ask for assistance, and on these visits crucial knowledge was obtained about the terrible conditions the peasants were facing. Moreover, the numerous Germans who sought refuge in Germany after 1929, either as German citizens or because they had managed somehow to leave the Soviet Union, were systematically interrogated by the Gestapo upon their arrival. The material thus collected was kept in the files of several institutions; it was used for intelligence purposes but also in anti-Bolshevik publications.¹⁸ At the height of the famine ethnic Germans sent a considerable number of letters (so-called *Hungerbriefe*) to Germany, a large number of which were addressed to religious institutions. In addition, ethnic Germans who emigrated to Germany upon their arrival forwarded letters received from their relatives in Ukraine to the Foreign Office. Also, many

¹⁵ "The German Peasants in the Soviet Union," 23 September 1934, Politisches Archiv Auswärtiges Amt (hereafter PA AA R83854).

¹⁶ German Embassy in Moscow, "Die Reichsdeutschen in der Union der SSR," 18 December 1930, PA AA R60202.

¹⁷ German Embassy in Moscow, "Die Reichsdeutschen in der Union der SSR," Stand von November 1935, PA AA R83854. See also W. Mensing, "Sowjetbürger werden oder packen—Stalin und der Exodus der Russlanddeutschen im Spiegel der Akten des Auswärtigen Amts," *Jahrbuch für historische Kommunismusforschung* (2015) 217–35. According to a report by the Geheime Staatspolizei in 1939, 5,000 were still living in the Soviet Union. See W. Mensing, "Die Vernehmungsprotokolle der 'Rußlandrückkehrer' eine unausgeschöpfte Fundgrube im Politischen Archiv des Auswärtigen Amts," *Jahrbuch für Forschungen zur Geschichte der Arbeiterbewegung* (III) (2003): 154–70.

¹⁸ K. Krupinski, *Rückkehrer berichten über die Sowjetunion* (Berlin: Stollberg, 1942). Krupinski's book is based on 3,400 Gestapo interrogations. Information on the gathering of these data is in BA R6/147. A second report, which was based on the same source but not published, described the conditions of the ethnic Germans in the Soviet Union. See PA AA R127509. Since many interrogations contained information on the famine of 1932–33, they were excerpted by the Ministry of the Interior and collected separately, in order to be used in anti-Communist propaganda. See BAB R58/3493. According to Wilhelm Mensing, who has systematically analyzed a large number of the original interrogations, the famine of 1932–33 does not figure prominently in the accounts of the German returnees (Mensing, "Sowjetbürger werden oder packen," 217–35).

addressees living in Germany wrote to the German Foreign Office on behalf of their relatives, forwarding the letters they had received.

Apart from information *strictu sensu*, it must be noted that unlike other countries which regarded Soviet internal affairs as something distant and pertaining exclusively to the field of foreign affairs, the presence of significant numbers of ethnic Germans in the USSR compelled Germany to perceive the famine as a problem directly affecting national politics. The feeling of a shared bond with Soviet ethnic Germans, who were part of the “imperial legacy” in German national history, had been strongly revived during World War I and was heightened by several crises, such as the one in 1929 when 15,000 Mennonites targeted by the first wave of dekulakization gathered on the outskirts of Moscow pleading to be allowed to leave for Germany. Their request was granted after lengthy negotiations.¹⁹

Interestingly, Germany was one of the few countries where an organized relief operation with the participation of government representatives was in place. Started already during the Mennonite crisis, the operation was systematized in 1933, when several religious, charitable, and pro-ethnic German organizations, led by a strong initiative from the Mennonite community, set up an umbrella relief committee known as “Brüder in Not” (Brethren in Need).²⁰ It took charge of collecting funds from state agencies and private donors, and organized the delivery of food packages and money transfers to starving Germans via the Soviet foreign-currency Torgsin shops. In order to identify the Germans in need of relief, a central card file of all “hunger letters,” complete with senders’ addresses, was kept at the German Foreign Office. The operation ran, with increasing difficulties owing to Soviet bans on the delivery of packages, from 1933 to the German attack on the USSR in 1941. In 1933 a British diplomat, struck by the efficiency of Reich institutions in caring for their ethnic kin, wrote that “the ethnic network that most functions to convey information, aid requests, and aid is the German one.”²¹

Another source of information was the large community of émigrés from the former Russian Empire living in Germany. These asylum seekers arrived in

¹⁹ The literature on these events is fairly extensive. See, e.g., Mick, *Sowjetische Propaganda*, 356–70; J. Oltmer, “Volksdeutsche fremder Staatsangehörigkeit: Grenzen privilegierter Migration in der Weimarer Republik,” in *Handbuch Staat und Migration in Deutschland seit dem 17. Jahrhundert*, ed. J. Oltmer (Oldenburg: De Gruyter, 2015), 483–502.

²⁰ The committee set up a “working committee” comprised of representatives of all participating organizations., including the Nationalsozialistische Volkswohlfahrt (National Socialist People’s Welfare), the Evangelical Charity Organizations, the German Caritasverband, Mennonites, and several organizations for the preservation of relations with ethnic Germans, e.g., the Volksbund für das Deutschtum im Ausland and the Deutscher Schutzbund für das Grenz- und Auslandsdeutschtum (founded in 1919), one representative of the Foreign Office, and one from the German Red Cross. See Deutsches Rotes Kreuz, Betr. Hilfswerk “Brüder in Not” für notleidende deutsche Volksgenossen im Auslande, 21 June 1933, PA AA R127510.

²¹ Sir Esmond Ovey, British Ambassador in Moscow, to Simon, 13 March 1933, in Carynnyk et al., *Foreign Office and the Famine*, doc. no. 24.

Germany in several waves between 1919 and 1923. Estimates differ widely, but their numbers in 1925 might have been as high as 500,000, thus constituting a large multi-ethnic community. Though it greatly decreased in the following years, the number of refugees from Russia still amounted to 100,000 in 1933, with a strong concentration in Berlin, which became home to a large number of cultural organizations, newspapers, magazines, and publishing houses—testifying to the intellectual vitality of this community.²²

Finally, Germany had a long tradition of cultural contacts with the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, which found expression in a significant number of scholarly institutions dealing with the history and politics of Eastern Europe and the Russian Empire. Whereas the field of *Osteuropäische Geschichte* (Eastern European History) began to establish itself increasingly in the German academic landscape in the early twentieth century, after World War I and notably after 1933, so-called *Ostforschung* (East-related research) came to be the dominant approach in the study of Eastern Europe. Unlike the former, *Ostforschung* was marked by a politicization aimed at revising the Versailles order.²³

Among the actors that had access to information from the Soviet Union, the most relevant was the diplomatic corps. The *Auswärtiges Amt* controlled the most relevant source of information, namely, diplomatic proxies. Many of the reports on the famine that appeared in the press at the time reproduced parts of diplomatic dispatches sent by German consuls. This points to the fact that, far from establishing a monopoly on the information flow from the Soviet Union, the German Foreign Office worked as a sort of floodgate or, in other words, a key node of an information network stretching from the Soviet Union to Germany. Therefore, the question arises as to the ways by which and the reasons why information collected in the Soviet Union that reached the Foreign Office in Berlin was handed over by the diplomatic corps to other state and non-state actors.

The behavior of the Foreign Office in relation to the dissemination of news about the famine was conditioned by the state of Soviet-German relations at the time. In 1933 diplomats of the Foreign Office still regarded the Rapallo policy—namely, the maintenance of good relations with the Soviet Union—as a key element of German foreign policy.²⁴ Rapallo had helped Germany out of the isolation in the years immediately following World War I, and had allowed it to regain international prestige. In addition, friendship with the Soviet Union was seen as

²² K. Schlögel, ed., *Berlin: "Stepmother" among Russian Cities*, in *Russian-German Special Relations in the Twentieth Century: A Closed Chapter?* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2006), 43–76.

²³ E. Mühle, "Ostforschung: Beobachtungen zu Aufstieg und Niedergang eines geschichtswissenschaftlichen Paradigmas," *Zeitschrift für Ostmitteleuropa-Forschung* 46, no. 3 (1997): 317–50; Markus Krzoska, "Ostforschung," in Ingo Haar and Michael Fahlbusch, eds., *Handbuch der völkischen Wissenschaften* (Munich, 2008), 452–63.

²⁴ S. Slutsch and C. Tischler, eds., *Deutschland und die Sowjetunion 1933–1941* (Munich: OldenbourgVerlag, 2013).

a means to deflect the possibility of a military invasion from Poland through an alliance with its major enemy, a policy that in internal documents was called *Rückendeckung* (rear cover policy). As Hitler's rise to power threatened to strain German-Polish relations, German diplomats were convinced that it was even more important to keep in place the Soviet "rear cover" against Poland while preparing for war.

Hitler's rise to power between 1932 and 1933 was feared as a major threat to the Rapallo policy, because the National Socialist Party had a clear anti-Bolshevik agenda and had openly demonstrated its program of eastward expansion. Yet, in the first years of his rule Hitler sought to posture as a moderate politician in foreign affairs. Thus, he gave the Foreign Office staff ample room for maneuvering, and stressed continuity instead of rupture in foreign relations. His decision in May 1933 to ratify the German-Soviet Neutrality and Nonaggression Pact, which had been renewed in 1931, seemed to point in this direction. Nevertheless, moderation soon gave way to a more aggressive course. From 1934 Hitler imposed a stronger grip on German foreign policy, thereby irreparably souring relations with the Soviet Union. However, this course of events was not foreseeable in 1933, and therefore German diplomats, especially those belonging to the so-called "Russia Desk" of the Foreign Office, initially believed in the possibility of keeping the Rapallo policy alive.²⁵

This attitude on the part of German diplomats affected their "politics of information" about the famine in two ways. First, they tried as much as possible to curb the spread of news about the famine in German society. Instead, anti-Bolshevik propaganda conducted by several non-state institutions was used as evidence of the famine in order to campaign against Communism. For example, in the summer of 1933 a "protest meeting against the starving of the Germans in Russia" was called by several organizations, among them the NSDAP. These campaigns placed Germany's relations with the Soviet Union under great strain, inasmuch as the Bolsheviks never admitted to the existence of a famine in their country. The Foreign Office thus had to silence this kind of mobilization and avoid giving the impression that it was in any way involved in it.

This "prudence" in disseminating information had its limitations. Like all other Reich institutions, the Foreign Office conducted or supported a policy directed against the Communist Party or the remnants of the communist movement after it was suppressed by the Nazi government. To this end, it was important to release news about the real conditions in what the German communists idealized as the "Soviet paradise," such as news about the famine. Moreover, the German Foreign Office had no monopoly on information. Therefore, it had to take into account the fact that German public opinion was informed through other channels of the catastrophe unfolding in the Soviet Union. For instance, in 1933 the Brethren in Need committee launched a "public collection" (*Reichssammlung*) to raise money

²⁵ For detailed discussion of the Russia Desk during the Weimar years, see I. Sütterlin, *Die "Russische Abteilung" des Auswärtigen Amtes in der Weimarer Republik* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1994).

to be sent to ethnic Germans. Booklets featuring pictures of the famine were circulated among German citizens to motivate them to contribute to the collection. It was impossible, therefore, to completely deny the existence of a famine in the Soviet Union.

As a result of these two contrasting aims, namely, keeping Rapallo alive and releasing news of the famine, the Foreign Office adopted a cautious strategy of disseminating information, sometimes even distributing copies of consular dispatches to a select number of institutions and non-state actors (for example, churches), in order to prevent any uncontrolled leaking of news. For example, copies of consular dispatches were sent to the Evangelical Church, which were then used to raise money for the relief operation for ethnic Germans. However, these documents circulated as "reports from a reliable informant," their true provenance—local consular proxies—being thus concealed.

This information policy was successful to some extent. The German government was not particularly outspoken in denouncing the famine publicly. Several episodes connected to the leaking of news about the famine strained German-Soviet relations, but they never led to a diplomatic crisis.

The second aspect of the information policy relates rather to the content of the dispatches themselves. There is evidence that German consuls were advised by the Foreign Office to moderate their reporting on the famine, in order to avoid the impression that the Soviet Union was about to collapse under the weight of unrest in the countryside.²⁶ The Russia experts at the Foreign Office did this because they sought to convince the new National Socialist rulers in Berlin that the Bolsheviks would remain in power in the years to come and that it was therefore advisable to come to terms with them.

The same attitude also informed the way that diplomatic dispatches dealt with nationality issues. In his early writings Alfred Rosenberg, director of the *Außenpolitisches Amt* (Foreign Policy Office) of the NSDAP, had argued that the party should support the cause of the nationalities oppressed by Great Russian chauvinism. In the wake of the Nazi seizure of power, rumors that Rosenberg was working on plans to detach Ukraine from the Soviet Union began to circulate in Germany and abroad. Indeed, in the first months of Nazi rule Russian émigré circles approached the new rulers (contacts with the NSDAP had been established as early as the 1920s) with a view to forging an alliance with the National Socialists.²⁷ Therefore, the Russia experts at the Foreign Office tried in their reporting to show that the nationalities factor did not play a significant role in the outbreak and geographical distribution of the famine.

²⁶ See, e.g., the exchange of letters between Andor Hencke and Fritz von Twardowski, the latter reprimanding the consul because of his too-pessimistic reporting about the famine, in PA AA R27438.

²⁷ H.-A. Jacobsen, *Nationalsozialistische Außenpolitik 1933–1938* (Frankfurt am Main: Alfred Metzner Verlag, 1968), 85 and ff; S. Kuusisto, *Alfred Rosenberg in der nationalsozialistischen Aussenpolitik, 1933–1939* (Helsinki: Suomen Historiallinen Seura, 1984), 108–19.

In sum, the Foreign Office's attitude was to try to influence the perception of the famine by the National Socialist rulers and German public opinion in order to ensure continuity in foreign policy. This was done by dampening to some extent the impact of the news about the famine on German society.

II

As Andrea Graziosi points out in an article that provides new insights into the interpretation of the Soviet famines,²⁸ in order to understand the multilayered nature of these events one must distinguish between two different but closely interrelated aspects. On one level, in the 1930s there was the general phenomenon of food insecurity and famines deriving from the particular way in which collectivization and industrialization were conducted. On a second level, there were specific processes, such as the dramatic acceleration of the famine in 1931–33, which affected specific areas to an unprecedented degree and the methods that the state used to tackle this crisis. The way that diplomats reported the famine attests to their clear understanding of this multilayeredness.

As for the first level, within the Foreign Office the possible outcome of Soviet industrialization had been broadly discussed since its inception. This is due to the fact that this institution was particularly concerned with the consequences of forced industrialization for the stability of the Soviet economic and political systems and thus with the impact of these internal developments on diplomatic and economic relations with the Reich. It is no surprise, then, that German reports show an acute awareness early on that Soviet industrialization was heading toward a major crisis. A telling instance of this is a meeting of state officials and representatives of the German conglomerate IG Farben in February 1930, during which the latter presented data and observations collected during travels in the Soviet Union. Already at this early stage they believed that collectivization would result in a strong decrease in crop yields the following spring. In their opinion, Ukraine and the south of Russia would suffer relatively less than other regions because of their particularly fertile soil. This expectation, as we know, would prove wrong. In other respects, however, the forecast by IG Farben's representatives was quite interesting and accurate. They believed that collectivization would "disrupt agriculture" and lead to a major political crisis. This crisis could be manifested in two forms: either a military coup or a famine that might lead to a popular uprising. However, in discussing this second outcome, most of those present came to the conclusion that the "central power *had* the possibility of handling the situation to the effect that only local famines and local starving *would* take place," thereby lowering the chances of a general uprising and preventing a collapse of the Bolshevik system.²⁹

²⁸ A. Graziosi, "The Soviet 1931–1933 Famines and the Ukrainian Holodomor: Is a New Interpretation Possible, and What Would Its Consequences Be?" *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 27, nos. 1/4 (2004–2005): 97–115.

²⁹ Meeting at the Reich Ministry of Economics on the state of the Soviet economy. Employees of the German firm IG Farben report impressions gained during their stay in the USSR, 21 February 1930, PA AA R29276.

A common trait of the memoranda written after the inception of collectivization is the clear understanding that a major component of this process was the human factor, namely, the peasants' attitude to collectivization. German diplomats understood early on that behind the economic problems there was a struggle between the state and the peasants, the latter resisting collectivization, which they perceived as a new form of serfdom. (The expression *Leibeigenschaft* is used in many German reports.) In their dispatches German diplomats provided different views on this struggle. Some pointed to intentional resistance by the peasants in response to the war waged by the Bolshevik system against them. In some cases, diplomats showed sympathy to the peasant world, especially when talking about German peasants.

In most reports, however, they demonstrated understanding of the necessities that had forced the Soviet authorities to start modernization from above, although they criticized the specific way that the Bolshevik leadership had steered the process of industrialization. Many reports emphasized that peasant resistance was the product of their backward mentality, their natural indolence, or their deeply entrenched, individualistic mindset—attitudes that prevented them from adapting fully to the modernization of Soviet agriculture. The German consul in Kharkiv, for example, wrote in December 1933 that the cause of the famine was that the regime "had decided to carry out collectivization too early, too fast and with insufficient means, thus throwing agriculture into great disarray and, because of other factors, overlooking the fact that according to Stalin himself 'cadres decide everything' and disregarding the issue of whether twenty-two million Ukrainian peasants would follow him or show understanding of and collaborate with the new collective economic form [which went against] their deep-rooted individualistic ideology."³⁰

Although they despised Bolshevism as a political system, German diplomats shared the Bolsheviks' view of the peasant world as a place of backwardness and somehow even admired the Soviet Communists' ability to modernize the country in such a short span of time. In this they were not alone. During the Great Depression the Soviet Union was admired throughout the world, as it was the only country that was spared an economic slump and, moreover, was even able to make a huge leap toward industrialization.³¹ Even in Fascist Italy, Soviet industrialization was regarded with keen interest by groups of intellectuals, especially those who had traveled to the Soviet Union.³² Yet, German diplomats did not consider peasants as a mere relic of the past, an attitude that mirrored widespread pro-agrarian currents in Germany at the time.³³ On the whole, German reports do not display a complete aversion toward the countryside but rather a sort of idealization of

³⁰ German Consulate in Kharkiv, "Jahresbericht. Die allgemeine Lage in der Ukraine," 11 December 1933, PA AA Moskau 348.

³¹ For a short overview, see M. Mazower, *Dark Continent: Europe's Twentieth Century* (London: Allen Lane–Penguin Books, 1998), 117–28.

³² See, e.g., P. L. Bassignana, *Fascisti nel paese dei Soviet* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2000).

³³ K. Bergmann, *Agrarromantik und Grossstadtfeindschaft* (Meisenheim am Glan: Hain, 1970).

the good peasant, embodied by the German colonist with his percipient attitude to modernization, as opposed to the huge mass of backward “Slavic” peasants. A passage from a report from Kharkiv clearly expresses this position: “Both from a theoretical and a practical point of view, socialized agriculture is surely justified as a necessary substitute for the small and unproductive economic units [...] But the small crop yields and big losses show that the people of the countryside in their majority have not yet taken the predestined way [*vorgezeichneten Weg*], but that, instead, they remain outside and have not yet undergone the change of mindset necessary to achieve better results.”³⁴

A thread running through all the dispatches is the attempt by the diplomats to establish which causal factor was responsible for the famine. In this respect, it is interesting to note that most diplomatic dispatches do not see any trade-off between an intentionalist and a structuralist explanation of the famine.³⁵ On the one hand, the famine was explained by German consuls as a complex series of socio-economic processes stemming from the decision to conduct industrialization at breakneck speed. On the other, the idea was also widespread that the Soviet regime had exploited the famine as a means of crushing the peasants’ resistance to collectivization. In a passage from his 1979 memoirs Andor Hencke, the German consul in Kyiv between 1933 and 1935, expressed the prevailing view among German diplomats about the famine with this incisive passage: “The Muscovite dictator certainly did not want a famine, if only for the fact that his way of thinking was too realistic to understate the danger for his state arising from it. The world knows that Stalin did not dread any risks in internal policy when, in his eyes, a substantial goal was at stake. However, he has never increased on purpose the difficulties already given in the way therein.”³⁶

A key figure in the history of the German perception of the Great Famine is Otto Schiller, Attaché for Agricultural Issues at the German Embassy in Moscow. A long-serving expert in Soviet affairs, Schiller had close contacts with the network of cultural associations known as *Ostforschung*, which eventually led to his posting in occupied Ukraine during the war as an agrarian expert of the *Wirtschaftsstab Ost*, in charge of devising the new agrarian system to be introduced after the re-privatization of collective property.³⁷ During the 1932–33 famine Schiller reported constantly to Berlin, providing information about the development of

³⁴ German Consulate in Kharkiv, “Die allgemeine Lage in der Ukraine,” 30 September 1932, PA AA Moskau 348.

³⁵ For a similar attitude in Polish reporting, see J. J. Bruski, “In Search of New Sources: Polish Diplomatic and Intelligence Reports on the Holodomor,” in *Holodomor and Gorta Mór. Histories, Memories and Representations of Famine in Ukraine and Ireland*, ed. Christian Noack, Lindsay Janssen, and Vincent Comerford (London: Anthem Press, 2012), 215–30.

³⁶ A. Hencke, *Erinnerungen als Deutscher Konsul in Kiew in den Jahren 1933–1936* (Munich: Ukrainische Freie Universität, 1979), 29.

³⁷ C. Gerlach, “Die deutsche Agrarreform und die Bevölkerungspolitik in den besetzten sowjetischen Gebieten,” in C. Gerlach and C. Dieckmann, *Besatzung und Bündnis: Deutsche Herrschaftsstrategien in Ost- und Südosteuropa* (Berlin and Göttingen: Verlag der Buchläden, 1995), 9–60.

Soviet agriculture collected during long trips he made in his own car. A typical route of one of his road trips stretched for 4,200 km, covering the following localities: Homel (Gomyel), Chernihiv, Kyiv, Bila Tserkva, Kamianka, Zinovievsk (now Kropyvnytsky), Bobrynets, Kryvyi Rih, Vysokopillia, Nikopol, Dnipropetrovsk (now Dnipro), Zaporizhia, Melitopol, Molochansk, Berdiansk, Mariupol, the Donbas, Kharkiv, Kursk, Orel, Tula, Roslavl, and Moscow.³⁸ Travelling entirely on his own, Schiller was able to circumvent the control of the Soviet authorities and to interview peasants unimpeded, gaining first-hand information not available in the press. This led to several conflicts with the Soviet authorities, even though Schiller tried his utmost to avoid them. After he was threatened with expulsion several times, he had to leave the USSR in 1936.

In his memoranda Schiller portrayed in great detail the dire conditions of the peasants and the depopulation of entire regions. Far from providing mere descriptions, his memoranda contain systematic inquiries into key issues, such as the intensity of the famine in different regions, from which he tried to make sense of mortality variations. In his opinion, a major reason for the discrepancies in mortality rates was the different cultural and economic development achieved by the population of different areas and between different ethnic groups within the same area. In Ukraine, for example, Schiller noted that German colonists were affected less severely by the famine than Ukrainian and Russian peasants.³⁹ He explained this by pointing out the exceptional performance of independent German peasants in previous years, which had resulted in a larger accumulation of capital stock. When the famine broke out, German colonists were able to sell these assets, acquiring the means to survive the food crisis for a longer period of time than others.

One major factor that Schiller recognized behind such variations was a political one. For example, he pointed to the differences in mortality rates between Ukraine and the North Caucasus. The latter, according to his estimates, was affected more severely than Ukraine. In his view, one of the causes of this variation in the geographical distribution of the starving was what he termed the "political use of the famine," that is, an intentional strategy of food denial to break down resistance. The regions that had suffered more were those where an uncompromising anti-Soviet attitude was present, as, for example, in the Cossack regions of the North Caucasus. There, the decrease in agricultural output and large-scale deportations of the population had resulted in a reduced workforce and completely disrupted agriculture.

Schiller also spoke of the "political use of the famine" in explaining how the Soviet authorities overcame the crisis of 1932–33. In the summer of 1933, in an effort to assess the crop prospects for the following harvest, which he expected to be higher than in the previous year, he concluded: "The crop in the S[oviet] U[nion],

³⁸ O. Schiller, "Die Ernteaussichten in einigen Gebieten Zentralrußlands," 17 July 1933, PA AA R94408.

³⁹ The idea that the German colonists had achieved an outstanding level of economic and social development was quite common in German writings about the USSR.

however, like everywhere, is dependent not only on weather but also on the work of people. It cannot be denied that this year people employed in agriculture are working much more than last year. This fact is particularly surprising considering that the food supply of the people this year is considerably worse and that the hunger catastrophe has negatively impacted not only the attitude of the people for work but also their physical ability.”⁴⁰

The reason for this change was the introduction of the general “labor service duty,” a form of forced labor. However, even more important was the use of grain distribution by the state to a selected number of regions as political leverage. Schiller observed that in the winter of 1932–33, when the famine had reached its peak, the state had begun distributing both food and seedstocks. The distribution of aid followed a clear political strategy, aimed at forcing people to work in the fields.

The correlation between nationality issues and famine is a recurring topic in many of the diplomatic reports sent to Berlin from the USSR. Most diplomats clearly saw the *turnaround in the Kremlin’s nationalities policy* that had taken place in those years, a policy that had also increasingly targeted Germans and was regarded with great concern in diplomatic circles. German dispatches also show a clear awareness that a “national interpretation,” to use Terry Martin’s apt expression, had taken hold within the Bolshevik leadership, namely, the idea that separatist tendencies in Ukraine stood behind the procurement crisis.⁴¹ Yet, they believed that targeting nationalism for the failure of crop collection was a means of crushing opposition to Moscow rather than a goal in and of itself. Just as any expression of discontent was labeled as Trotskyism, so too in Ukraine any demand for support of the Ukrainian language or culture was considered a deviation from the party line and a weakening of the center’s control over the peripheries.⁴²

Another passage from Hencke’s memoirs helps synthesize the predominant view among German diplomats at that time: “Hatred of the Muscovite lords pervaded the people. Here my impression was that outrage against the Bolshevik order, with its far-reaching impact on the life of each individual, was much stronger than the feeling of national oppression. Moscow was fully aware of the several causes of this tension. By emphasizing the Ukrainian issue under the aspect of high treason, the Kremlin endeavored to distract from the burning problems of economic hardship.”⁴³ In a memorandum of 1933 Schiller treated this issue particularly systematically. He noted that there was a widespread idea among the

⁴⁰ O. Schiller, “Die Ernteaussichten in einigen Gebieten Zentralrußlands,” 17 July 1933, PA AA R94408.

⁴¹ T. Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2001), 273–308.

⁴² See, e. g., General Consulate Kharkov, “Politischer Jahresbericht,” 6 December 1935, PA AA Moskau 348.

⁴³ Hencke, *Erinnerungen als Deutscher Konsul*, 31.

peasants that the state's handling of the famine was swayed by Great-Russian chauvinism. However, he dismissed this hypothesis, pointing to the fact that in Ukraine no preference was accorded to Russian peasants. Instead, for economic reasons the mortality rate showed a clear cleavage in favor of German colonists, as we have seen, and disadvantaged both Ukrainian and Russian peasants. Schiller concluded: "The suffering of the German peasants has been caused by the Soviet agricultural policy. This, however, is directed against the peasantry of the S[oviet] U[nion] as a whole, with no regard for national differences as far as these are not linked with social and economic differences."⁴⁴

As for nationalism within Ukraine, most German diplomats stressed that nationalist feelings in the republic were rather a product of the famine and discontent with the Soviet regime. In their view, opposition to Bolshevism was more important than purely nationalist goals, such as the struggle for independence or for unification with Western Ukraine, then under Polish rule. Several reasons account for this view. First, as I stated earlier, the Foreign Office sought to counter Rosenberg's policy toward the non-Russian nationalities in the Soviet Union. Moreover, there was a widespread idea that Moscow's grip on the other republics through the party structure did not allow the development of any nationalist movement. Another reason lies in the prevalence of a "master nation" bias, which saw in the Ukrainian national peasant identity a second-class nationalism, as opposed to what they perceived as a higher degree of national consciousness among Germans and, in particular, German colonists.

III

As already mentioned, the famine became the subject of Nazi propaganda only after 1935, when the regime unleashed a fierce anti-Bolshevik campaign.⁴⁵ During the wartime occupation of Ukraine collaborationist newspapers, such as *Nova Ukraina*, dealt extensively for the first time with the famine of 1932–33 in Ukraine, providing the very first estimates of deaths. In 1942 the first scientific investigation of the famine was conducted by Stepan Sosnovyj, an agrarian expert from Kharkiv, and partly published in the occupation press.⁴⁶ Yet, looking at several publications of the time, one is tempted to say that the famine was never perceived as a discrete phenomenon, as a humanitarian catastrophe standing apart from all other concomitant phenomena, such as collectivization, dekulakization, and the ensuing purges; the perception of the latter probably overshadowing that of all

⁴⁴ O. Schiller, "Die Auswirkung der bolschewistischen Wirtschaftspolitik auf den Umfang und die Verteilung der Hungersnot," 15 July 1933, PA AA R94408.

⁴⁵ See, e. g., Fritz Dittloff, "Die Hungerkatastrophe in der Sowjetunion im Frühjahr 1933 und ihre Gründe," in Alfred Laubenheimer, ed., *Und du siehst die Sowjets richtig: Berichte von deutschen und ausländischen "Spezialisten" aus der Sowjet-Union* (Berlin, 1935), 315–22.

⁴⁶ Hausmann and Penter, "Instrumentalisiert, verdrängt, ignoriert," 208–10; T. Penter and D. Tytarenko, "Der Holodomor, die NS-Propaganda in der Ukraine und ihr schwieriges Erbe," *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 69, no. 4 (2021): 633–67.

other previous occurrences. The famine was regarded instead as part and parcel of a particular perception of Bolshevism as a dehumanizing and Asiatic process of barbarization. It is noteworthy in this respect that the authors of a propaganda booklet issued by the Eastern Division (*Ostabteilung*) of the *Aussenpolitisches Amt* merely allude to the famine in trying to account for the demographic changes that had occurred in Ukraine since the last available census.⁴⁷

Knowledge of the famine, however, affected Germany in several ways. First, it dashed any remaining hopes that the Bolshevik power would evolve toward “normalization,” an idea that had informed the choices of many members of the Foreign Office since the inception of industrialization.⁴⁸ The ruthlessness with which the Soviet power had dealt with the peasants’ opposition to collectivization had prevented the collapse of the Bolshevik regime. Yet, many reports stressed that the use of force could not work forever and that in order to integrate the peasants fully into the Soviet system the state had to raise their living standard. As Schiller put it in one of his reports, even a moderate improvement in the food supply system in the catastrophic situation of 1933 could gain the peasants’ goodwill. “Never has it been as easy as now,” he concluded, “for whatever government to win over the Soviet population by few means.”⁴⁹

As mentioned at the beginning of this essay, the perception of the famine as a disruptive crisis of the Soviet state strengthened those currents within the German leadership, which viewed the souring of Soviet-German relations as an inevitable outcome of the National Socialists’ rise to power. The perception of the famine cemented the idea among many Germans that the Soviet system was characterized by an unstable internal structure and that it was based on coercion to such an extent that any external strike might cause it to crumble in on itself—the very notion that in 1941 had nurtured the idea that the Soviet Union would immediately collapse upon the German invasion.⁵⁰ Although German diplomats tried their utmost to check this idea by stressing the solid foundation of the Soviet system, their very endeavors to counter this opinion support the fact that it was slowly taking root in the German leadership.

The famine also contributed to the shaping of particular perceptions, not only those related to the Soviet Union but more generally to a particular view of modernization that was to have lasting effects in the years to come. As Susanne Heim and Ulrike Schatz have argued, the ideas and experiences gathered in the Soviet

⁴⁷ G. von Mende, *Die Völker des Ostraumes* (Berlin: Stollberg, ca. 1942), 24. A second publication on Ukraine does not mention the famine at all. See *Die Bücherei des Ostraumes. Ukraine* (Berlin: Stollberg 1942).

⁴⁸ Mick, *Sowjetische Propaganda*, 311.

⁴⁹ O. Schiller, “Die Ernteaussichten in einigen Gebieten Zentralrußlands,” 17 July 1933, PA AA R94408.

⁵⁰ See the essays in *Das Rußlandbild im Dritten Reich*, ed. Hans-Erich Volkmann (Cologne: Böhlau, 1994).

Union during collectivization, dekulakization, and famine were seminal for many German experts, crystallizing the idea that "agrarian overpopulation" as a major obstacle to modernization had to be addressed by all possible means, including violent population transfers. Population experts, economists, and students of Eastern Europe who came to play a key role in the occupation of the Soviet Union after 1941 embraced the idea that Soviet modernization, though marred by the "uncivilized" "Russian" toughness with which it was conducted, was to be regarded as a model experience.⁵¹ Writing on Soviet agricultural development in 1941, Otto Bräutigam, director of the Russia Desk of the Foreign Ministry Economic Department prior to 1936, remarked that this subject had aroused his interest because the Soviet Union had tackled an issue common to Eastern and Western Europe, namely, the modernization and reduction of overpopulation in the countryside. He noted, however, that the Bolsheviks had solved these problems with their own methods (which the Germans themselves were to adopt), that is, the extermination of millions of peasants, arguing that the experiment was worth analyzing because of its unprecedentedness.⁵² Bräutigam's argument is a typical instance of foreign perception of the Soviet Union during the early 1930s, when it was regarded as a "developing country" where the authorities could experiment with ideas of social engineering.

Last but not least, the famine contributed enormously to the strengthening of the bond between the German Reich and Russian-Germans, which became a decisive factor in the Germans' wartime occupation policy in Eastern Europe.⁵³ This is especially true for the organization Brethren in Need, which operated until the German invasion of the Soviet Union, but with increasing difficulty. The USSR was not the only place where a strong connection with ethnic Germans was established

⁵¹ S. Heim and U. Schatz, *Berechnung und Beschwörung: Überbevölkerung—Kritik einer Debatte* (Berlin: Verlag der Buchläden Schwarze Risse, Rote Strasse, ca. 1999), 85–89.

⁵² O. Bräutigam, *Die Agrarpolitik der Sowjetunion* (Berlin: Deutsche Informationsstelle, 1942).

⁵³ The pro-German or pro-National Socialist attitude of the Russian Germans is a very contested issue that has given rise to a strongly politicized discussion. A study by Meir Buchsweiler focuses on the question whether Ukrainian Germans were convinced National Socialists and acted as a fifth column in the Soviet Union. No reliable sources allow us to establish this aspect with certainty. However, the question seems to be ill-defined. For Germans living in the Soviet Union at the time, the existence of a staunch anti-Bolshevik regime in Germany became conflated with their strong orientation toward that country for other reasons. Germanness, National Socialism, and anti-communism can be separated only from today's point of view. During the war they strongly overlapped. What is more interesting is the fact that for many Russian-Germans the material assistance provided by Germany was a strong motivation for their fidelity to National Socialism. This is revealed by the results of a survey conducted by the Canadian Mennonite journal *Der Bote* in the interwar years, which show how the Mennonites felt committed to Germany for the relief efforts that had been provided in 1929. See M. Buchsweiler, *Ethnic Germans in the Ukraine towards World War II: A Case of Double Loyalty?* (Tel-Aviv: Diaspora Research Institute: Society for Jewish Historical Research, 1980), 92.

prior to the World War II. Throughout Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, the Reich set up centralized institutions to assist all Germans abroad. Yet, the famine created a particular bond, one that was based on extensive material assistance that reached approximately 36,000 families up to 1941.⁵⁴ It may be said that in the same years that Germany was turning eastwards—the expression used by Michael Burleigh⁵⁵ to denote the collective leaning of the German culture toward an imperial expansion in the East—ethnic Germans in the USSR were turning westwards, with Germany assuming the features of a “caring” power. The German Consul in Kyiv stressed as early as December 1933 the political gains earned by Germany for assisting the starving Germans. In a letter intercepted by the GPU he wrote:

No other nation in the world gave proof of its ties with its compatriots living in Russia in such a planned manner and on such a wide scale, moreover, without directly involving itself (as Germans). In fact thousands of Germans were saved from the worst of the famines, and with thousands more a boundless trust for their old fatherland was born. A more effective demonstration against the anti-German campaign of lies and slander unleashed by the Bolsheviks was not possible. In fact, a most widespread cultural propaganda campaign has been carried out which has also borne fruit with the Russian, Ukrainians, Poles and other nat[ional] minorities. The Soviet citizens of Slav origin living in our consular region look with envy at their brothers in misery, the Germans, whose poverty is not only the subject of resolutions and not only the subject of discussion in all possible forums, but who receive active aid from the donations flowing in from the fatherland. It is known to me that in numerous requests [for aid] received by the local Polish Consulate, the population of Polish descent continually points to the German example, with no results, however. In creating attitudes favorable for the Germans, it is obviously a very beneficial circumstance that regardless of the related accusations in the area of foreign policy, the available aid is offered exclusively under the German flag. Not only for humanitarian reasons and national ties, but also from the propaganda perspective, it would be highly desirable for the organization “Brethren in Need” to be able to continue its work also in the future for as long as it proves possible.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ “Bericht des Verbandes für Evangelische Auswandererfürsorge über das Evangelische Hilfswerk ‘Brüder in Not’ an den notleidenden Reichs- und Volksdeutschen in der Sowjetunion 1929–1941, erstattet in der Mitgliederversammlung des Evangelischen Vereins für deutsche Ansiedler und Auswanderer von Else Schmidt,” 3.12.1941, PA AA R127511. The “imperial” dimension of German politics in Europe during the interwar period is a much-discussed topic. For a fruitful approach stressing the importance and peculiarity of the self-consciousness of the Germans as a “‘trans-cultural actor’ or, to be more precise, at least a member of a trans-imperial nation,” see E. R. Dickinson, “The German Empire: An Empire?” *History Workshop Journal* 66 (2008): 129–62.

⁵⁵ M. Burleigh, *Germany Turns Eastwards: A Study of Ostforschung in the Third Reich* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

⁵⁶ D. Boyko, *Holodomor: The Great Famine in Ukraine, 1932–1933* (Warsaw: Institute of National Remembrance, Commission of the Prosecution of Crimes against the Polish Nation, 2009), d. 185, 499.

Else Schmidt, who was in charge of running the relief operation until 1941, notes in her final report (1941) on the results achieved by Brethren in Need:

In the last years, when the Soviet Union more and more sealed itself off hermetically from the outside world, when almost all letter exchanges with the Soviet Union came to a standstill, our deliveries were almost the only possibility of keeping the link with a part of the ethnic Germans and bringing them, besides material help, also the valuable spiritual message: "You have not been forgotten in your old homeland." Without doubt we have contributed to consolidating ideally the basic attitude of the ethnic German peasant in the Soviet Union against communism. Some German colonies that now have been freed by the German Wehrmacht have been included in our operation for years.⁵⁷

It can also be said that the peculiarity of the famine was due to the fact that German public opinion recognized to an unprecedented extent the suffering of those whom they considered their "brothers of blood." In addition to the propaganda about the famine, the *Reichssammlung* of 1933, in support of the starving Germans, gave the population a concrete sense of what was happening. This also established a bond that was to have important consequences in the following years.

Паоло ФОНЦІ

“Демонстрація сили проти непокірного селянства”:
що німці знали про Великий Голод в СРСР і як вони
його сприймали

Паоло Фонці — доцент в Університеті Східного П'ємонт у Верчеллі. Докторат здобув в Університеті Неаполя (Федеріко II) і Гумбольдтському університеті в Берліні. Провадив широкі дослідження історії націонал-соціалізму, приділяючи особливу увагу економічній політиці Третього Райху і Другій світовій війні.

У 2016 р. був стипендіятом стипендії ім. Євгена Шкляра в Гарвардському інституті українських студій, де працював над проєктом про німецьке сприйняття Великого Голоду в Україні та на Північному Кавказі (1932–33) під керівництвом проф. Андреа Граціозі.

⁵⁷ "Bericht des Verbandes," 3.12.1941, PA AA R127511, AA R127511.

На основі німецької документації — здебільшого, проте не лише дипломатичних депеш з СРСР — у статті досліджено, як німецька держава й недержавні актори сприймали радянські Голоди 1931–33 рр. Спершу проаналізовано, як інформація, одержана через німецьку дипломатичну мережу в СРСР, поширилася серед німецького населення. У цьому контексті згадано історію порятункової операції “Браття в потребі”, що її ініціювали німецькі політичні й релігійні організації для допомоги етнічним німцям, які страждали від голоду. Автор досліджує культурні звички, що вплинули на те, як німецькі дипломати сприйняли і зрозуміли Голоди. Розглянуто також довготривалий вплив знання про радянські Голоди на німців.

Ключові слова: радянські Голоди, радянська колективізація, націонал-соціалізм, етнічні німці, зовнішня політика Німеччини.

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