

Stephen G. Wheatcroft

Assessing the level of famine mortality and natality in comparison with normal mortality in the USSR in the 1920s and 1930s

Abstract

The level of normal mortality on the eve of the great famine of 1931-33 is difficult to assess because of the very dramatic decline in mortality that was occurring in the years following the extremely high level of exceptional mortality of 1918-22. The level of famine mortality is always difficult to assess because of the presumption that registration systems will collapse in famine periods. In the Soviet case there are additional problems associated with the plan constructivist distortions of the first five year plan period, and the inclination of the security services to assume that wreckers were responsible for figures that differed from the anticipated results. However there are grounds for assessing the reliability of these indicators, and they show that these data are not as corrupted as is often assumed.

The levels of mortality that are often accepted as 'normal' mortality may indeed be a rather unusual temporary low level at which a census happened to have been carried out. In terms of previous Russian and Soviet history December 1926 was a rather unusual year to accept as normal.

Turning to the registration data, we should note the history of the registration system and the different stages through which it passed. There was undoubtedly a period of grave distortion in the late 1920s and early 1930s when statistics were replaced by accounts and when the pressures to report plan fulfilment made it dangerous to report figures other than those expected. But this plan constructivism period reached its peak in 1929-1930 and the first half of 1931, when the Soviet Statistical Administration TsSU was incorporated into Gosplan first as the Statistical Economic Section and then as the Department of National Economic Accounts. This was the period when it was presumed that censuses were no longer needed. But from late 1931 and through 1932 and 1933, despite the famine, there was a move towards improved statistical accounting through a new more independent statistical body TsUNKhU and its very unusual and surprisingly independent Director N. Osinskii. (It was Osinskii who coined the phrase 'plan-constructivism' to describe the distortions that the statistical system had been faced with in the previous years.) From 1932 to the first

half of 1934 there was a virtual renaissance in statistical thinking. Livestock censuses were carried out and plans were made to revive demographic censuses (although the latter were delayed fatefully to 1937). From 1934 with the establishment of NKVD-USSR the registration system ZAGS would fall under increasing political pressures from the security forces with claims of infiltration by wreckers who were allegedly double recording deaths and under-recording births . So surprisingly the famine period was actually a period of relatively reliable statistical evaluation.

Apart from this we should note that there is an internal relationship between different parts of the demographic data and how they react in times of crisis. The demographic crisis associated with the famine is manifest by an elevation of mortality that coincides with a reduction in fertility and a reduction in natality after a 9 month lag. By contrast incomplete demographic registration will lead to an apparent fall in all indicators, which may be unreal. Therefore a close investigation of monthly mortality and natality data could provide us with an indication of whether the changes in pattern are a consequence of poor statistical registration or of the famine itself.

As regards the numerous reports that we have of breakdowns in the statistical system, we should note the difference between the conjunctural system, which undoubtedly broke down and the full annual system that by and large did not break down in Ukraine or European Russia. The conjunctural system was an early warning monthly system that required monthly data to be sent to the centre for processing within ten days of the end of the month. It was anticipated that many regions would not be able to complete their figures on time, and those that were late were simply advised to ensure that the monthly data was provided for the fuller and more important annual cycle, and completed one or two months after the end of the year. In the uncertain circumstances of the early stages of the famine there was undoubtedly great concerns about being the first to report bad news. Many offices may have run out of registration forms, abut others would have delayed reports out of a sense of caution. But by the end of the year there was already fuller internal acceptance of the famine and the annual reports look fairly complete.

This paper will re-examine the evidence provided by the 1926, 1937 and 1939 censuses and the monthly regional birth and death registration data (from completed annual reporting cycles) for the 1920s and 1930s to re-assess the scale and incidence

of excess mortality and deficit births associated with the famine. It will question the reliability of the Andreev, Darskii, Kharkova estimates of USSR and RSFSR mortality and natality and the Shkolnikov/Mesle/Ukrainian Institute of Demography estimates of Ukrainian mortality and natality for these years. It shows also that these estimates are in any case incompatible. The paper argues that , although there are undoubted problems in using the registration data, they can nevertheless provide us with useful and meaningful mass indicators of many aspects of the famine.