

**The Colonists: Collectivization, Dekulakization, and Famine and its effect on Jewish Farming in Ukraine.**

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## **The Colonists: Collectivization, Dekulakization, and Famine and its effect on Jewish Farming in Ukraine.**

The governmental policies of collectivization and dekulakization leading up to the Famine of 1932-1934 in Ukraine left its mark on all Ukrainians, including the Jewish populations. With the new Soviet regime, the government encouraged and pressured Jews to become agriculturalists. A small portion of the community did become collective farmers with the help of the Argo-Joint, an American non-profit organization, while the majority became urban workers. The Jews were victims of the collectivization, dekulakization, and the famine, but these events had less of an effect on the entire Jewish community compared to the smaller Jewish agricultural community. They managed to integrate American and newer farming techniques, and along with the protection of the Argo-Joint, many Jews were saved from these events.

Since Catherine II and the creation of the Pale of Settlement, Jews had been living in modern day Ukraine, Belarus, Lithuania and Poland. They lived in small towns called shtetls—segregated from the non-Jewish populations of each country. Jews eked out a simple living as peddlers, small craftsman, merchants, tailors, etc. A small portion worked as farmers: Within that group, an even smaller group sold their harvests for profit. This simple way of life began to deteriorate in late 19<sup>th</sup> century and was accelerated by World War I, along with the decline of the Russian monarchy. Within the Pale of Settlement, Jews lived a narrow life. They were prohibited from living outside the area. They were restricted from Russian schools by quotas, and therefore forced to send their children outside of the Russian Empire to get a university education. Also, Jews were forbidden from doing government jobs.

Jews were followers of many of the political movements that were popular in late 19<sup>th</sup> century Russian Empire. Zionism, the belief that there should be a Jewish state, was created in 1897. Although not prevalent among the Eastern European Jewish population, it was one of the political parties that influenced the population and accounted for emigration from the Russian Empire. Like Haskalah, Zionism also encouraged Jews to move to become

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agriculturalists. Zionism wanted Jews to leave behind their traditional way of life and become a “new” Jew who would be strong, work the land, and speak Hebrew. Another Jewish political party was the Jewish Workers’ Labor Bund, created in 1897, which advocated for Jewish cultural autonomy and later Jewish national autonomy coupled with Marxism. In addition to these two Jewish parties, Jews also joined the Marxist Bolshevik and Menshevik parties but at a lesser rate. Marxism particularly offered a future for Jews where they wouldn’t be excluded and discriminated against in society.

Jews began to fill many local party and government posts in the early years of the Soviet Union. Previously, they had been disenfranchised from any government job under the Tsars.<sup>1</sup> Minorities and other groups who previously had been discriminated against were ideal candidates for these types of jobs: They were seen by the government as loyal to the state because the Soviet government had uplifted them from their previous stations in life.<sup>2</sup> Jews were happy to take these jobs because they wanted to escape the pogroms of the Ukrainian countryside and the Famine of 1921-1922.<sup>3</sup> During the Famine of 1932-1934, many of the Jews who worked as local administrators sent reports to the central government about the situation in the countryside, and, unfortunately, they received no reply.<sup>4</sup>

After the fall of the Russian monarchy in 1917, without the previous restrictions, Jews could move out of the shtetls and other small towns into the larger cities such as Kyiv, Kharkiv, and Odesa. Jewish religious autonomy, which had previously been declining, was antagonistic to the new regime because of their anti-religious stance. The government shut down synagogues and destroyed religious iconography. Jews began to look for new jobs with

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Dekel-Chen. *Farming the Red Land: Jewish Agricultural Colonization and Local Soviet Power, 1924-1941*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 135-136.

<sup>2</sup> Arkadii Vaksberg. *Stalin Against the Jews*. (New York: Knopf, 1994), 60.

<sup>3</sup> Yohanan Petrovsky-Shtern, and Antony Polonsky. *Jews and Ukrainians* (London: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2013), 264.

<sup>4</sup> Yohanan Petrovsky-Shtern and Antony Polonsky. *Jews and Ukrainians*. 60.

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the new regime—jobs that they could not do in their small towns—although the majority of Jews remained stuck in the former Pale of Settlement in the early 1920s.<sup>5</sup> Jews who wanted to immigrate to Palestine or America were trapped after a 1924 law restricted the borders of the Soviet Union. At the same time, the British restricted immigration to Palestine.<sup>6</sup> Many Jews also lacked the financial means to immigrate because most of the Jews had lived in poverty in the Pale of Settlement.<sup>7</sup>

The new regime began to ban the traditional jobs of the Jews—merchants, peddlers, craftsman—because they saw them as capitalistic. Many Jews with these jobs were classified as *lishentsy*, meaning that some of their civil rights were taken away as they were deemed capitalistic and therefore enemies of the state. That status of *lishentsy* meant that the government could discriminate against these labeled people in food distribution, deny them the right to vote, and deny them equal access to medical attention.<sup>8</sup> After the constitution of 1918, half of the Jewish population had lost their civil rights.<sup>9</sup> This number jumped to 82% of the Jews who lived in Ukrainian cities being classified as *lishentsy*.<sup>10</sup> Jews began to look for jobs such as factory work or farming that would reinstate them their rights. However, many factories were closed, and there was little land in shtetls available for farming in the beginning of Soviet Union.<sup>11</sup> Many Jews chose to move to the cities and work in factories amounting to 1.5 million of the 2.7 million Jews working in factories in 1932.<sup>12</sup> However,

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<sup>5</sup> Jonathan Dekel-Chen. "'New' Jews of the Agricultural Kind: A Case of Soviet Interwar Propaganda." *The Russian Review* 66, no. 3 (2007): 429.

<sup>6</sup> Jonathan Dekel-Chen. "'New' Jews of the Agricultural Kind: 429.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 429

<sup>8</sup> Allan L Kagedan. "Soviet Jewish Territorial Units and Ukrainian-Jewish Relations." *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 9, no. 1/2 (1985): 121.

<sup>9</sup> Jonathan Dekel-Chen. "'New' Jews, 428.

<sup>10</sup> Allan L Kagedan. "Soviet Jewish Territorial Units and Ukrainian-Jewish Relations." 121.

<sup>11</sup> Jonathan Dekel-Chen. "'New' Jews, 429.

<sup>12</sup> Allan Kagedan. "American Jews and the Soviet Experiment: The Agro-Joint Project, 1924-1937." *Jewish Social Studies* 43, no. 2 (1981): 155.

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luckily for the Jews who did not want to live and work in the cities, an American organization came to help them work on farmland instead.

The Argo-Joint or the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee began to operate in the Soviet Union in December 1924. World War I and the Russian Civil War had devastated the Jewish communities both physically and financially. Whole shtetls were destroyed along with many Jews who were victims of pogroms. The Argo-Joint stepped in to provide relief to the Jewish communities. This organization was an American organization created by Joseph Rosenberg looking to help Soviet Jews.<sup>13</sup> They drafted a series of contracts with the Soviet government that allowed them to legally expand settlements around the Black Sea beyond what already existed.<sup>14</sup> Previously, in 1923, Jewish families began settling in empty land in Belarus, southern Ukraine, and Crimea.<sup>15</sup>

A popular idea in the American Jewish mind at the time was the idea of the rebirth of the ancient Israeli farmer instead of the shtetl Jew.<sup>16</sup> Adding to this idea of a Jewish farmer were the thinkers of the French Enlightenment and Tsar Alexander I.<sup>17</sup> However, this dream was not popular among Ukrainian Jews until they had to choose second-class citizenship or agriculture. To succeed in this dream, the Argo Joint provided the necessary skills and equipment for these Jewish settlements to succeed. They took the knowledge from American agriculture and transplanted it to the settlements. Many of the colonists were novices to farming and eager to learn the newest techniques unlike the non-Jewish populations who had

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<sup>13</sup> Jonathan Dekel-Chen. *Farming the Red Land: Jewish Agricultural Colonization and Local Soviet Power, 1924-1941*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 96.

<sup>14</sup> Dekel-Chen. *New Jews*, 429.

<sup>15</sup> Jonathan Dekel-Chen. "'New' Jews of the Agricultural Kind: A Case of Soviet Interwar Propaganda.": 429.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 443.

<sup>17</sup> Allan Kagedan. "American Jews and the Soviet Experiment: The Agro-Joint Project, 1924-1937." *Jewish Social Studies* 43, no. 2 (1981): 158.

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traditions and sentiments that tied them to their historical way of farming.<sup>18</sup> Others saw the collective farms as ways to guard their Jewish identity and culture against the Ukrainization occurring in the cities. However, secular economic and social changes still weakened Jewish culture.<sup>19</sup> To succeed, the Argo-Joint gave the settlers tractors, combines, and other farming equipment. In 1924, the organization drew suspicion from the government because they owned 1/10 of all the tractors and combines operating in the Soviet Union. Unlike in other collectives where any farmer could operate the farming equipment, specific, trained teams of tractor drivers operated the machines.<sup>20</sup> Moscow government officials did not like how the Argo-Joint controlled the tractors, and this caused tensions between the two.<sup>21</sup>

The farms produced more than one product unlike the traditional Ukrainian farmers and trained the colonists through vocational schools and classes. They produced livestock such as cows, chickens, and pigs; and many types of vegetables, grapes, sorghum and cotton. These products were used both to consume and sell. This allowed them to weather the Famine of 1932-1934 more easily than other farmers because livestock and some vegetables were untouched during the procurements.<sup>22</sup> Interestingly, in the winter, the farmers, specifically in Crimea, continued to work; they had workshops where the farmers made hats, toys, and knitted and glass products. The colonies consisted of 100 families and were grouped into blocs containing 600 families.<sup>23</sup> They built high quality housing for the farmers and provided vocational training for the new settlers and their children.<sup>24</sup> As more families joined the colonies, women began to make up a larger number of the students in the vocational

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<sup>18</sup> Jonathan Dekel-Chen. *Farming the Red Land*, 116.

<sup>19</sup> Yaacov Ro'i., and Avi Beker. *Jewish Culture and Identity in the Soviet Union*. (New York: New York University Press, 1991) 11,13.

<sup>20</sup> Jonathan Dekel-Chen. *Farming the Red Land*, 141.

<sup>21</sup> Jonathan Dekel-Chen. *Farming the Red Land*, 137.

<sup>22</sup> Jonathan Dekel-Chen. *Farming the Red Land*, 150.

<sup>23</sup> Jonathan Dekel-Chen. *Farming the Red Land*, 143.

<sup>24</sup> Dekel-Chen. "New" Jews, 430.

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schools. By the early 1930s, they made up 40% of the students at the trade-schools.<sup>25</sup> This reflects the communist value of equality that perforated Ukraine at the time.

The Argo-Joint had to explain and sell communism and collectivization to the American donors. The Western press had maligned collectivization and communism in the 1920s, and many Americans Jews believed the American way of farming to be the correct way to farm. Nevertheless, the Argo-Joint received large donations during the 1920s and 750,000 more acres of farmland, in addition to their initial one million acres, in Crimea for Jewish colonization.<sup>26</sup> During 1930-1932, many of the investors pulled out of the organization. The Great Depression in America affected the stream of donations to the Argo-Joint and was one of the reasons the Argo-Joint left the Soviet Union. The Argo Joint quit settling Jews in the lands in the early 1930s because they lacked funds.<sup>27</sup> When they eventually left the Soviet Union in 1937, they had resettled two hundred thousand Jews and had provided vocational training for thousands of other Jews.<sup>28</sup>

The Soviet government supported the organization but was suspicious of it nonetheless. The Soviet government gave the organization free infrastructure and put aside one million acres of state land to be used for the new settlements.<sup>29</sup> However, they were suspicious of the relationship between the American Argo-Joint organization, and the Soviet Komzet. They thought that these two organizations were too close for their comfort. In the early 1930s, the authorities decided to act against the close relationship by punishing the leader of the Argo-Joint, Joseph Rosen. They took away his access to high offices in the

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<sup>25</sup> Jonathan Dekel-Chen. *Farming the Red Land*, 153.

<sup>26</sup> Jonathan Dekel-Chen. *Farming the Red Land*, 139.

<sup>27</sup> Jonathan Dekel-Chen. *Farming the Red Land*, 140.

<sup>28</sup> Jonathan Dekel-Chen. *Farming the Red Land*, 116.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, 430.

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government by removing non-communist specialists like Rosen and removed party members that supported the Right.<sup>30</sup>

Soviet authorities attempted to change the identity of Jews, but they faced many obstacles from both the non-Jewish and Jewish communities. To the non-Jewish community, Jews were urban and greedy—exploiting the non-Jewish community. Jews were seen as disloyal to the state. The Orthodox Jewish community in the new Soviet Union also disliked the new regime because the government wanted to take the traditional way of the life that they and their ancestors had been living for centuries.<sup>31</sup> To change these attitudes there and abroad, the government created “The Society for the Settlement of Jewish Toilers on the Land or OZET.” This organization was created to attract foreign investment but also to change attitudes about Jews at home. The Kremlin knew that they could not support the large Jewish, collective farms and newly unemployed Jewish population without foreign money.<sup>32</sup> They used print media such as books, articles, and pamphlets.<sup>33</sup> OZET produced and distributed three silent films about Jewish farmers: the first, “Jews on the Land” in 1927, the second, “The Land is Calling” in 1928, and the third, “Seekers of Happiness” in 1936.<sup>34</sup>

One of the reasons the Soviets chose to celebrate the specific Jewish farmers is because they wanted to modernize and unify the empire. The first way that they tried to do this is through indigenization or allowing ethnic and minority groups to have cultural autonomy while modernizing them through education and new occupations. This was to make an image and identity for the population living in the new Soviet world.<sup>35</sup> One of the changes in identity came in which animals were associated with Jews. The Argo-Joint

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<sup>30</sup> Jonathan Dekel-Chen. *Farming the Red Land*, 137-138.

<sup>31</sup> Dekel-Chen. “New” Jews, 431.

<sup>32</sup> Dekel-Chen. “New” Jews, 432-433.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, 433.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, 438.

<sup>35</sup> Dekel-Chen. “New” Jews, 426.

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supplied the colonies with pigs for practical purposes. This decision was most controversial in the break between the old and new identity. Dogs just like pigs, previously not associated with Jews, became companions of the “new” Jew.<sup>36</sup> Not only were Jews made to have a new identity, one that encompassed the new Soviet identity, but also a new rural identity. However, they were still made to assimilate into the larger Soviet culture.

Birobidzhan became the new region for Jews only after its declaration in 1934. Previously Jews had been settling in Crimea, Southern Ukraine, and Belarus. The regime had been considering Birobidzhan since 1928, but they publicly announced their endorsement of this Jewish autonomous region with a stamp. This stamp associated Jews with Birobidzhan and was used in the regime’s propaganda.<sup>37</sup> Stalin wanted all the Jews out of the cities and wanted them together in one place to control them better. Therefore, the government heavily propagandized and publicized Birobidzhan in the 1930s. Stalin saw this autonomous region and the Jewish inhabitants as a good buffer between Japan and Russia.<sup>38</sup> However, few Jews moved to Birobidzhan. In the first two years of the autonomous region, 1928-1930, only two thousand Jews moved there. During 1928-1933, 20,000 Soviet Union Jews settled there and 1,500 Lithuanian Jews.<sup>39</sup> Adding to the lack of appeal, once the early unemployment of the Soviet Union disappeared, Jews were less likely to leave the cities and join the colonies or move to Birobidzhan.<sup>40</sup> The dream of Birobidzhan was never fully realized because the Far East was not enticing enough to compete with the Argo-Joint’s settling policies, or dreams of America or Palestine.

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 440.

<sup>37</sup> Dekel-Chen. “New” Jews, 442.

<sup>38</sup> Arkadii Vaksberg. *Stalin Against the Jews*. (New York: Knopf, 1994): 65.

<sup>39</sup> P.M. Polian *Against Their Will: The History and Geography of Forced Migrations in the USSR*. (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2004), 66.

<sup>40</sup> Alfred Greenbaum. "Soviet Jewry during the Lenin-Stalin Period. II." *Soviet Studies* 17, no. 1 (1965): 89.

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### **Collectivization**

Lenin had previously attempted collectivization in Ukraine but had stopped after the large resistance there. In response, Lenin created Committees of Poor Peasants to eliminate some of the influence that the kulaks had in the villages. Under Stalin, collectivization was finally realized and with it the ag industry changed from capitalistic to communist. Before announcing collectivization, Stalin began to see the kulaks as dangerous because they were given more economic power with the NEP capitalistic policies. He also worried that there would be an attack by the capitalistic countries of the West. To combat these worries, he announced the First Five Year plan in 1928. This plan called for development in heavy industry and collectivization of 20% of all peasant farms.<sup>41</sup> The increase in industrialization relied on the government being able to buy grain cheaply from the collective farms to feed the growing factory population. The peasants refused to sell their grain because the prices were too low. In response, Stalin ordered complete collectivization.<sup>42</sup>

At the beginning of 1928, the leaders of the Party began to believe that there was a grain crisis. The export of grain had ceased in 1928, and the government had failed to build up a grain reserve. The basic figures about the grain production were dangerously distorted making Stalin believe there was a grain crisis. The deficit was only 2,160,000 tons which, according to Robert Conquest, was not a crisis. The peasants consumed a majority of their yields leaving little for the cities and even less for export. The government wanted to export the grain, but they had the problem of getting hold of it. The peasants did not want to sell the grain because the prices proposed by the government were too low to support them.<sup>43</sup> By

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<sup>41</sup> Orest Subtelny *Ukraine: A History*. 3rd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000): 405.

<sup>42</sup> Orest Subtelny *Ukraine: A History* 409.

<sup>43</sup> Robert Conquest. *Harvest of Sorrow*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986): 89.

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autumn 1928, grain and livestock production decreased due to pressure on more prosperous peasants and the low price which did not motivate the peasants to sell.<sup>44</sup> The government began to requisition grain nationwide in February 1929 in reaction to a government shortage and by spring 1929, they began to requisition livestock as well.<sup>45</sup>

In the summer of 1929, in the Lower Volga region of Ukraine, Stalin began the collectivization. Initially the peasants were resistant to collectivization and were forced, often violently, into collective farms. The government saw small farms as unproductive and underperforming.<sup>46</sup> In January 1930, twenty-five thousand factory workers and soldiers forced resistant peasants into the new collective farms. Party officials would come to the villages and pressure a few peasants to form a collective farm. As a means of resistance, farmers would riot and protest. To hide their grain, farmers buried it. They would put grain in their relatives' names, sell it to poorer peasants or illegal smugglers at very low prices. If they could not sell, farmers would turn the crop into hay, throw it in rivers, or burn it.<sup>47</sup> They would also slaughter their animals so that the government would not take them. As a last resort, they would sell everything and move to the city for work.<sup>48</sup>

By March 1930, 3.2 million farms had entered the collective farms.<sup>49</sup> In March 1930, Stalin temporarily halted collectivization, and half of the farms went back to individual farming.<sup>50</sup> Within the weeks between March -April 1930, the number of farmers living on collectives reduced from 50.3% to 23% and further declined until the fall. To encourage collective farming after March 1930, the government made it economically ruinous to own an

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<sup>44</sup> Robert Conquest. *Harvest of Sorrow* 93.

<sup>45</sup> Robert Conquest. *Harvest of Sorrow* 94-95.

<sup>46</sup> Robert Conquest. *Harvest of Sorrow* 108.

<sup>47</sup> Robert Conquest. *Harvest of Sorrow* 103.

<sup>48</sup> Orest Subtelny *Ukraine: A History* 412.

<sup>49</sup> Orest Subtelny *Ukraine: A History* 412.

<sup>50</sup> Jonathan Dekel-Chen. *Farming the Red Land*, 132-132.

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individual farm. Individual farmers could not take farming equipment after they left the collective; the government gave them bad farming land; they had high taxes imposed on them and the fear of being deported to the gulags.

Beginning in 1920, the number of Jewish farmers began to swell due to unemployment among the community and their new status of *lishentsy*. From 1922-1924, the number of Jews in the Southern Ukrainian colonies jumped to 43,980. The older Jewish colonies were desperate for labor because the Civil War and Famine of 1921-1922 had taken away many of the workers. After the older colonies were filled, Jews began to look for new land on which to settle and thus the new collective farms were created.<sup>51</sup> However, in a 1935 survey of 12 Ukrainian villages, only 3% of Jews worked on collective farms. This shows that Jews left the farms in the early 1930s for other professions and in reaction to the government's attacks on the peasants.<sup>52</sup>

Before collectivization in the Soviet Union, each Jewish family owned their own land and products on the *kolkhozes* (collective farms), but they farmed collectively.<sup>53</sup> This made the transition much easier than that of the Ukrainian peasants. The Jewish communities had the Argo-Joint to help facilitate their move to collective farms. During this time, the organization had to change from an organization that helped settle Jews on farm lands to an organization that acted as an intermediary between the state and the colonists.<sup>54</sup> The Argo-Joint began to work with the Soviet government organization Komzet. The Argo-Joint knew about the plan of collectivization from Komzet before it was put into action, and they had time to introduce this mandate to the colonists before it was law. Therefore, the transition was

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<sup>51</sup> Allan L Kagedan. "Soviet Jewish Territorial Units and Ukrainian-Jewish Relations." 120.

<sup>52</sup> Jeffery Veidlinger. *In the Shadow of the Shtetl: Small-Town Jewish Life in Soviet Ukraine*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013): 78.

<sup>53</sup> Jonathan Dekel-Chen. *Farming the Red Land*, 149.

<sup>54</sup> Jonathan Dekel-Chen. *Farming the Red Land*, 160.

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easier and was less of a shock to the colonists.<sup>55</sup> These two organizations worked together to enforce collectivization on the new settler colonies. Interestingly, instead of using force to ensure collectivization, Komzet imposed large fines on Jews who refused to collectivize.

Mira Pasik grew up in Mykolaiv and lived on the Jewish collective farm, Yefingor, there. She says in her interview with AHEYM or the Archive of Historical and Ethnographic Yiddish Memories, that everyone on the collective farm spoke Yiddish even the non-Jews. Surprisingly, they celebrated all the Jewish holidays and tried to keep kosher.<sup>56</sup> Since the Soviets insisted on a new secular identity, the collective farm's celebration of the holidays is of interest because the colonists openly subverted the new promoted identity in favor of an identity that was inherently Jewish.

Tatiana Marinina also lived on a collective farm. She was born in 1921. Growing up, her family were so poor that they had to share shoes. Her father became a butcher, and then they had a modest amount of money. They had their own shop. The fact that the family had a modest amount of wealth and owned private property are the reasons that the Marinina believes that her family were forced onto a collective farm in Crimea in 1930. On the farm, there were huge orchards where they grew apples, pears, peaches, and watermelons. They also kept thousands of sheep. The Jews there worked harmoniously alongside ethnic Germans and Tatars. An interesting note is that Marinina says, "the whole community on the farm would celebrate Passover together, and there would be many sukkahs (temporary huts/tents) during the holiday Succoth." Her quote could be speaking about the entire Jewish community living on the farm or the entire community made up of Jews, Tatars, and

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<sup>55</sup> Jonathan Dekel-Chen. *Farming the Red Land*, 160.

<sup>56</sup> Mira Pasik, interviewed by Dov Ber Kerler, *AHEYM*, 2008.

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Germans. Like many other Jews, in the late 1930s, Marinina and her family moved back to where they had lived before, and her father worked as a butcher again.<sup>57</sup>

In the Jewish Daily Forward of December 20, 1933, Henry Lang wrote about his experiences during his travels through the Soviet Union. He speaks about a specific *kolkhoz* called Royteh Shtern (in Yiddish). He writes that in 1933, this settlement was six years old, had four hundred people living in it, and very successful. Speaking on the colonists in this settlement, he writes that all of them came from cities like Vinnitsa and Berdichev. They had previously been tradesmen and peasants but had been disenfranchised so they moved to the farm for work and to gain back their civil rights. Many of the Jewish farmers moved to the colonies for similar reasons. Lang writes that the collective complied with all the regulations set by the government such as paying a percentage of their grain to the government, paying taxes, and participating in loans campaigns organized by the government. He comments that the government does pay for the grain it takes for this colony, but it is the cheapest price and not sufficient to support them.<sup>58</sup>

Additionally, non-collective farmers continued to exist, however this was not encouraged. Moyshe Nayman worked and lived on a farm that was not collectivized but privately owned. He grew up in Klyachanovo in Ukraine. Her parents owned six cows and made butter and cheese to sell in the Jewish shops. In his village, there lived 80 Jewish families and a couple thousand non-Jews. They managed to get along well. However, he says that a group of Hungarians would harass him and steal the cheese that he was delivering if he walked on a certain route. Therefore, he had to walk out of the way to deliver to the shops. His farm is one of the lucky few who were not collectivized, and his parents were not victims

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<sup>57</sup> Tatiana Marinina, interviewed by Dov Ber Kerler, *AHEYM*, 2002.

<sup>58</sup> Bohdan Klid and Alexander J Motyl. *The Holodomor Reader: A Sourcebook on the Famine of 1932-1933 In Ukraine* (Edmonton: CIUS Press, 2012): 122.

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of dekulakization. They also managed to survive the Famine but not the Holocaust.<sup>59</sup> Non-collectivized farms faced pressure from the government to collectivize and attacks from neighbors who were jealous of their wealth. Non-collective farmers were also subject to accusations of them being kulaks and had fears of deportation.

### **Dekulakization**

After the government announced the policy of collectivization in 1928, Stalin began to target the wealthier peasants because he perceived them as being most resistant to the new policy because they had the most to lose from collectivization and communism. Kulaks were the wealthier farmers of the villages. They owned more land than most of the other farmers and hired people to work on it. They only represented 5% of the peasantry. Many of the former kulak families were destroyed during the Civil War, and these new kulaks were poorer peasants who had become prosperous under the NEP policies. Some were deported to forced labor camps in Siberia and the Arctic or all their property was taken away and told to fend for themselves. Paradoxically, those farmers branded as kulaks could not lose their status of kulaks, but a middle peasant could become a kulak by gaining property.<sup>60</sup> Once branded a kulak, one could never get rid of that status.

The winter of 1929-1930 was the peak of dekulakization. The first mass arrests were in late 1929. At the beginning of 1930 they began mass deportations to the labor camps in the Far East, and the second wave of mass deportations came in the beginning of 1931.<sup>61</sup> Escape was the only way left for these families, many of these kulak families began to sell their property. Only in May 1929 did the government fully define what a kulak was: someone who regularly hired labor, had a mill or butter making operation, engaged in commercial

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<sup>59</sup> Moyshe Nayman Interviewed by Dov Ber Kerler, *AHEYM*, 2005.

<sup>60</sup> Robert Conquest. *Harvest of Sorrow* 120.

<sup>61</sup> Robert Conquest. *Harvest of Sorrow* 122-123.

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production or usury or other income not from work (like clergy).<sup>62</sup> This definition specifically attacked professions that Jews had historically done. This policy wanted to stop inequality between the farmers and people who were perceived to be exploiting their neighbors. However, it eliminated the most efficient farmers.<sup>63</sup>

The regime expected that communists in the countryside would help them find the kulaks. Unfortunately for them, there were too few communists in the countryside, and many of the peasants were unwilling to turn on their wealthier neighbors. Stalin had to send in factory and urban workers like Russian and Jewish communists or members of Komsomol to implement the policy.<sup>64</sup> To inflame the class struggle in the countryside, 25% of the grain taken was given to the poor peasants and workers. Poor peasants would defend their kulak neighbors due to loyalty to their friendship or fear that if all the kulaks were gone, then the government would turn their attacks to the middle and poorer peasants.<sup>65</sup>

The extent to which dekulakization effected the colonies depends on whether the colony was a part of the Agro-Joint organization or not. The Agro-Joint protected its communities and worked with the Komzet to ensure that they were largely unaffected by dekulakization.<sup>66</sup> The Jewish colonies claimed that there were no kulaks in their community, or they claimed that they had already eliminated the kulak elements from their community. This claim was not unique to Jewish colonies and popular throughout. However, in the more established Jewish settlements in Ukraine, dekulakization amounted for 6-8% of the population. This is a much smaller number than the non-Jewish population.<sup>67</sup> Interestingly,

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<sup>62</sup> Robert Conquest. *Harvest of Sorrow* 100.

<sup>63</sup> Orest Subtelny *Ukraine: A History*. 3rd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000): 409-410.

<sup>64</sup> Orest Subtelny *Ukraine: A History* 410.

<sup>65</sup> Robert Conquest. *Harvest of Sorrow* 97-98.

<sup>66</sup> Jonathan Dekel-Chen. *Farming the Red Land*, 160.

<sup>67</sup> Jonathan Dekel-Chen. *Farming the Red Land*, 159.

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Komzet would work with the Argo-Joint to eliminate problematic settlers from the colonies under the guise of dekulakization.<sup>68</sup>

Maria Yakuta, born in Teplyk in 1921, had family members who were victims of the dekulakization. Her uncle owned a small shop that sold pencils, candles, and kerosene. The Jewish government leader came to collect money, specifically gold, from everyone. The uncle had none so they threw him in jail for the entire winter. Yakuta believes the authorities persecuted her uncle because he owned a goat which allowed them to get milk everyday (a luxury) and the fact that he owned a small shop. She insists in her interview that the family were poor like everyone else except for the fact that they owned a goat.<sup>69</sup> This interview shows the absurdity of the policies targeting kulaks. Even the set definition could not stop the authorities from targeting anyone with private property or targeting someone they were angry with or envious of.

### **Famine of 1932-1934**

The Famine of 1932-1934, also known as the Holodomor, affected the entire Ukrainian population. The resistance of the peasants to collective farming led to harvested grain becoming spoiled in years leading up to the Famine. Large yields could not be obtained due to the lack of tractors and draft animals. In 1931, a drought hit southern Ukraine, further deteriorating the conditions of the farms. Stalin continued to impose the grain procurement even going so far as to expropriate next year's seed grain to sell in order to finance the industrialization efforts.

In 1932, Stalin raised the grain quota by 44%.<sup>70</sup> Stalin ordered the grain quota to be 7.7 million tons, later reduced to 6.6 million tons: Despite the reduction, these numbers were

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<sup>68</sup> Jonathan Dekel-Chen. *Farming the Red Land*, 162.

<sup>69</sup> Maria Yakuta, Interviewed by Dov Ber Kerler, *AHEYM*, 2002.

<sup>70</sup> Orest Subtelny *Ukraine: A History*, 413.

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impossible.<sup>71</sup> By the end of 1932, the government had only collected 4.7 million tons, and in the beginning of 1933, they launched a new assault on the countryside.<sup>72</sup> The government enacted new laws to make certain they got their grain. People caught stealing grain were executed or sentenced to ten years of hard labor. Watch towers were constructed in fields. Party activists could confiscate grain from peasants' homes. The procurements began in August 1932.<sup>73</sup> The most disastrous of all was the new law enacted in November 1932 that said that peasants were allowed no grain until the government's quotas were met.<sup>74</sup> Peasants rioted through 1932-1933 because grain was available to feed them, but they were prohibited from having any.<sup>75</sup>

In December 1932, the government introduced an internal passport system that restricted travel to and from cities to the countryside. This was in reaction to the harvest of the summer of 1932, where requisitioned grain left farmers and their families starving and on the move in search of food and work. Around the same time the government introduced a rationing system for the urban population—only because the countryside did not need such a system because they were already starving.<sup>76</sup> The rationing system privileged Party members, OGPU members, military, factory managers, engineers.<sup>77</sup> During the Famine, the government sent 40,000-50,000 Party members to the countryside to help confiscate grain, quell the rebellions, and assert control.<sup>78</sup> The famine hit its full force in March 1933. Particularly hard hit were the regions of the Kuban, the Don, and the Volga. Children were sent to labor camps

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<sup>71</sup> Robert Conquest. *Harvest of Sorrow* 222.

<sup>72</sup> Robert Conquest. *Harvest of Sorrow* 239.

<sup>73</sup> Robert Conquest. *Harvest of Sorrow* 224.

<sup>74</sup> Orest Subtelny *Ukraine: A History* 414.

<sup>75</sup> Robert Conquest. *Harvest of Sorrow* 235.

<sup>76</sup> George Liber. *Soviet Nationality Policy, Urban Growth, and Identity Change in the Ukrainian SSR, 1923-1934*. (Cambridge [England]: Cambridge University Press, 1992) 165.

<sup>77</sup> Robert Conquest. *Harvest of Sorrow* 248.

<sup>78</sup> Robert Conquest. *Harvest of Sorrow* 243.

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or orphanages, they turned against their own families, and starved to death alongside their parents.<sup>79</sup> People resorted to eating anything they could get, horrifically including other people. The victims would swell with hunger, get scurvy and boils, and eventually die from starvation.<sup>80</sup>

The number of victims is estimated around 3-6 million.<sup>81</sup> Robert Conquest, in his book *Harvest of Sorrow*, estimates that 5 million died with 3 million being children, about 1/5 to 1/4 of the Ukrainian farm population.<sup>82</sup> The government justified their decision to harvest and seize crops during the famine by saying that they had to break the kulaks who hoarded crops and exploited the other peasants.<sup>83</sup> They were also hostile to the Ukrainian peasants because they saw the complaints from the farmers and appeals from the government for help as a manifestation of Ukrainian nationalism.<sup>84</sup> Others believe the government pushed for collectivization and quotas so much in Ukraine because they saw Ukraine as a place where they could enact experimental policies. The Ukrainians could act as test subjects, so the Soviet Union could see outcomes of policies without subjecting their own citizens. The Soviet Union did not accept any foreign aid and continued to export grain leading Westerners to believe there was not a famine in Ukraine.<sup>85</sup>

The Jewish experience during the Famine differs from family to family just like the Ukrainian experience. Many of the interviews that are discussed are from The Archives of Historical and Ethnographic Yiddish Memories. Rosia Chukh was born in Berdichev,

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<sup>79</sup> Robert Conquest. *Harvest of Sorrow* 293.

<sup>80</sup> Robert Conquest. *Harvest of Sorrow* 257.

<sup>81</sup> Orest Subtelny *Ukraine: A History* 415.

<sup>82</sup> Robert Conquest. *Harvest of Sorrow* 249.

<sup>83</sup> Robert Kuśnierz, and Philip Redko. "The Impact of the Great Famine on Ukrainian Cities: Evidence from the Polish Archives." *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 30, no. 1/4 (2008): 25.

<sup>84</sup> George Liber. *Soviet Nationality Policy, Urban Growth, and Identity Change in the Ukrainian SSR, 1923-1934*. (Cambridge [England]: Cambridge University Press, 1992) 166.

<sup>85</sup> Orest Subtelny *Ukraine: A History* 409.

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Ukraine in 1919. She remembers in her interview with AHEYM that “we children were so hungry.” She attended school even during the Famine. She remembers that her brothers were always sleeping because they were so hungry and have little energy. Her mother worked as a seamstress at home; she would make blankets from linens taken from featherbeds and other pieces of thread and make blankets. Chukh’s father would travel around and sell the blankets. He would sell the blanket and use the money to buy more materials for the blankets and food for the family. This is the way that their family managed to survive the Famine.<sup>86</sup>

Motl Derbaremdiker lived in Berdichev like Chukh. He was born in 1920. His father worked as a soap maker and his mother a seamstress. In his interview, he discusses the misconception that only Ukrainians died: “In 1932-1933, everyone starved. It is a lie that only Ukrainians died. Jews in small towns died like everyone else.” Derbaremdiker describes a system that is common in many of these interviews; many Jews living in the countryside would receive support from their relatives in big cities like Moscow, Leningrad or from America. They would send packages that contained money or food like sugar and bread, however, by the time the post arrived, the food was already moldy.<sup>87</sup> Chaim Rubin’s memory of the Famine contrasts Derbaremdiker’s. Rubin says that no Jew in his town of Buki died of hunger, although this does not mean that other Jews in other places did not die. Part of their success with surviving was due to the community support system in place and the unconventional food sources like frogs from the river.<sup>88</sup>

The theme of care packages is common across many of these interviews. Most Jews were urbanites and had more money than their relatives in the country. They had more access to food through the established rationing system and could afford to send money and food to

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<sup>86</sup> Rosia Chuk, interviewed by Dov Ber Kerler, *AHEYM*, 2003.

<sup>87</sup> Motl Derbaremdiker, interviewed by Dov Ber Kerler, *AHEYM*, 2003.

<sup>88</sup> Chaim Rubin, interviewed by Dov Ber Kerler, *AHEYM*, 2002.

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help their relatives. Unlike the Ukrainians who largely worked and lived in the countryside and thus were at a disadvantage, the Jewish community used their jobs and living situations in cities to care for their relatives in the countryside.

Many of the interviewees remember death of family members. Veniamin Geller remembers the death of his father and brother during the Famine. Geller was born in Vyatka in 1923. His father worked at a sugar factory until it closed in 1932. His father continued to look for work but fell ill and died in 1934. His little brother, who was two years old, died during the Famine from starvation. Like Derbaremdiker, Geller recalls that relatives sent care packages from aboard to help their family.<sup>89</sup> Tsilia Khaiut's family also received packages from relatives aboard. All of her mother's side of the family left for America in the 1920s. Her father worked as a cobbler and did not make a lot of money. The money they received from the relatives, they used to rent their house. However, this money caused suspicion among the neighbors who wanted to know from where the money was coming.<sup>90</sup>

Torgsin stores, which were state-run, began operation in 1931, and served as a way for the population to get scarce goods if they had hard currency like American dollars or golds and jewels. Donia Presler, born in Tulchyn in 1929, was part of a family who used the stores. Her father worked as a musician and her mother a glazier. Her uncle and cousin died in the Famine. Her two sisters, Zisl and Gitl, had left for America before World War 1. The sisters would send US dollars to the family so they could buy flour and corn in the stores. The conversion rate between the dollar and kopek was so unequal, Presler remembers, that it would have been disadvantageous to them to convert the dollars. From the food, which they bought in the stores, they made a punch of water, corn meal, and salt which they would drink. Presler believes this is how they survived the Famine. Her and her family also worked some

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<sup>89</sup> Veniamin Geller, interviewed by Dov Ber Kerler, *AHEYM*, 2008.

<sup>90</sup> Tsilia Khaiut, interviewed by Dov Ber Kerler, *AHEYM*, 2003.

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of the fields during the Famine. She remembers the dry soil and how the authorities gave them soil bean soup for their work instead of payment.<sup>91</sup>

Frida Percherskaia was a small child when the Famine was raging, however, she remembers the hardships the Famine put on her family. Her parents sent her to an orphanage when she was two years old because they could not feed her. This was in 1929 before the Famine even began. However, her family were very poor. She remembered that, during the Famine, her mother would eat grass. Interestingly, Percherskaia says that although her family was very badly off, the Russians and Ukrainians living near here had it far worse.<sup>92</sup> Ukrainians and Russians did have it worse off than the Jews, and represent more of the victims. However, most Jews lived in the cities so the number of Jews victims, although never calculated, can be assumed to be less of their overall population than the Ukrainian population.

Party members and officials had to choose between their loyalty to the party and their loyalty to their family. A Jewish father wrote to his son, a staff writer at the *Pravda* newspaper (the official communist party newspaper). The father wrote to tell his son that his mother died:

My beloved son,

This is to let you know that your mother is dead. She died from starvation after months of pain. I, too, am on the way, like many others in our town. Occasionally we manage to snatch some crumbs, but not enough to keep us alive much longer, unless they send in food from the center. There is none for hundreds of miles around here...<sup>93</sup>

This letter is practically tragic because even though the father's son is a Party member, he is unable or unwilling to send food to save his family. This particular letter disproves

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<sup>91</sup> Donia Presler, Interviewed by Dov Ber Kerler, *AHEYM*, 2003

<sup>92</sup> Frida Percherskaia, Interviewed by Dov Ber Kerler, *AHEYM*, 2007.

<sup>93</sup> Robert Conquest. *Harvest of Sorrow* 256.

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stereotypes prevalent at the time; stereotypes about Jews being rich and well-fed during the Famine, and stereotypes about all Jews being Party members and participating in the grain confiscation.

Most Jews lived in Ukrainians cities and the Famine affected them as well. Starving people moved to cities to look for work and bread, leaving behind unharvested fields. People died on the streets of the major Ukrainian cities of Kharkiv, Kyiv, and Dnipropetrovsk. Due to the number of starving peasants who went to the cities illegally and the population decrease in the country side, there was a labor shortage for the harvest, multiplying the effects of the famine. Workers from the cities moved to the countryside to harvest crops during which their factories were shut down. Jews were some of the people sent the country side to help harvest. As seen previously in the interviews, the more prosperous Jews living in the cities also sent money to help their relatives living in the countryside.<sup>94</sup>

During the famine, the government sent urban Jews to help collect the grain from the peasants. Such is the case with Lev Kopelev who worked for the state newspaper, *The Locomotive Worker*. He was sent to the Myrhorod district of central Ukrainian in December 1932. Here he followed around members of the village rada (government) as they requisitioned crops and animals. He writes about how the government took away all the food: “[they] would search the hut, barn, yard, and take away all the stores of seed, lead away from the cow, the horse, and the pig... We even took part: we were entrusted to draw up inventories of confiscated goods...” He justified his actions back then as a revolutionary duty of all Soviet citizens to eliminate the kulak elements of the countryside and make sure the food was shared equally throughout. However, looking back, he is horrified that he

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<sup>94</sup> Robert Kuśnierz and Philip Redko. "The Impact of the Great Famine on Ukrainian Cities: Evidence from the Polish Archives." *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 30, no. 1/4 (2008): 17-18.

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participated in the requisitioning.<sup>95</sup> His story is not specifically Jewish in its nature, but it does show that Jews did participate in the requisitioning of grain from the Ukrainian and Jewish peasants although they were not the only ones.

Another perspective on the famine comes from Vasily Grossman, who was sent to Jewish collective farm in Ukraine to help with the harvest in 1932. The government imposed a quota on the collective farm which he remembers that “couldn’t have fulfilled in ten years!” This was the biggest problem facing the peasants; they could not have fulfilled the quotas because they were too large for the farm and left no crops for the farmers themselves.

Grossman remembers how the villagers struggled to meet the quota:

“So where could it come from, that promised ocean of grain from the collective farms? The conclusion reached up top was that the grain had all been concealed, hidden away. By kulaks who had not yet been liquidated, by loafers! The "kulaks" had been removed, but the "kulak" spirit remained. Private property was master over the minds of the Ukrainian peasant.”

His testimony shows that the government officials used this abstract idea of a “kulak” to justify the requisitioning of crops. The government took away from the farmers to punish them and break their kulak spirit, however, these people had to hoard out of necessity. The government took all their food without sympathy.<sup>96</sup>

The internal passport system and the police and guards stopped the villagers from seeking help. Grossman remembers, “There were blockades along all of the highways, where militia, NKVD (GPU) men, troops were stationed; the starving people were not allowed into the cities. Guards surrounded all the railroad stations.”<sup>97</sup> Even if the farmers in the

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<sup>95</sup> Lev Kopelev. *The Education of a True Believer*. (New York: Harper and Row, 1980).

<sup>96</sup> Vasily Grossman. *Forever Flowing*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), Chapter 14.

<sup>97</sup> Vasily Grossman. *Forever Flowing*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), Chapter 14.

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countryside and those living on collective farms wanted to leave and look for work or food, they were prohibited. Vasily Grossman went back to the city before he fell victim to the famine.<sup>98</sup> Because he worked for the government and lived in the city, he did not experience the starvation that other Jewish farmers did; however, he did assist with their farming and harvesting during this time.

A unique aspect about the Famine's effect on the Jewish population is that the GPU (the secret police) and the local governments extorted money out of the Jewish community. They did this because of the antisemitic trope of all Jews being rich, and the known ties that the Jewish community had with relatives in America. Henry Lang, of the Jewish Daily Forward on April 23, 1935 wrote,

“Before I left the United States, I knew that Jews of this country were aroused by numerous reports of a system of extortion and torture practiced by the GPU on relatives of American immigrants. The latter replying to appeals for help from their starving kinsmen in Russia, sent them small money orders. The famine had impoverished the soviet state treasury. The GPU then launched an organized campaign to extort American dollars as a source of government revenue.<sup>99</sup>

The GPU saw the Jews to get extra funds in a semi-legal way to help with famine relief. Lang says that Jews living on the *kolkhozes* only did survive because of these funds from their American relatives. This relationship is seen prominently in the interviews. This relationship is something that saved more Jews than Christians during the Famine.<sup>100</sup> Without the money and community support of the *kolkhozes*, more Jews would have been victims.

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<sup>98</sup> Vasily Grossman. *Forever Flowing*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), Chapter 14.

<sup>99</sup> Bohdan Klid and Alexander J Motyl. *The Holodomor Reader: A Sourcebook On the Famine of 1932-1933 In Ukraine* 134.

<sup>100</sup> Bohdan Klid and Alexander J Motyl. *The Holodomor Reader: A Sourcebook On the*

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There will never be an official number of the victims of these three events, leaving us with only estimates. However, the Jewish victims are often overlooked for a variety of reasons. Firstly, the death toll of the Famine and dekulakization does not compare to the genocide of the Holocaust. The Holocaust is such a watershed in Jewish history that lesser attacks like pogroms and the Famine are overlooked. Secondly, the number of Jewish victims were far lesser than the number of Ukrainian victims (not to diminish their victimhood) because most Jews lived in cities, Jews were sent aid from their relatives, and had protection from the Argo-Joint. Nevertheless, the Jewish victims of the dekulakization and the Famine should not be overlooked because their experiences as Jews and victims will give a fuller understanding of how these policies effected the entire population, minorities included, of Ukraine. Also, this comprehensive picture helps to disprove the stereotypes of Jews as aggressors during collectivization, dekulakization, and the Famine.

The Famine of 1932-1934 and the events preceding it must be remembered in the West's memory and the not just in the memory of its victims and their relatives. A devotion to a certain ideology (communism) caused the deaths and destruction of lives. Today, we must look at how our devotion to certain political movements and politicians are affecting groups of which we are not a part. As in the case of the Famine, it was easy to believe that the victims were kulaks or people who had committed crimes and to demonize them. It was even easier for those in Russia to ignore the tragedy completely. However, the memory of this state-sanctioned murder must remain in our minds and books to not forgot the victims and remember that governments have the power to commit acts like this.

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