

## POST-WAR FAMINE OF 1946–1947 IN REGIONAL DIMENSION AND PEOPLE'S MEMORY

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**Abstract:** After the Victory over Hitler's Germany, the USSR faced the task of early recovery of the national economy destroyed by the war. However, already in 1946, Russia, the Ukraine, Moldavia and several regions of Belarus and Kazakhstan were to undergo a new ordeal – famine, which was a consequence of three principal causes: post-war hardships, drought, and the food surplus requisitioning policy. The paper presents the problem of famine in the post-war village in regional dimension, based on analyzing archive documents and materials of surveying rural population of the contemporary Republic of Mordovia. In people's memory, the first years after the war have been captured as the hardest and the hungriest ones for a long time. The disaster spread to most districts of the republic, with scores of thousand people suffering from malnutrition and diseases.

**Keywords:** post-war period, everyday life, Soviet power, peasants, kolkhoz (collective farm) village, famine of 1946–1947.

### 1 Introduction

The relevance of the research topic is associated with the scientific and public importance which the post-war period of the newest Russian history has. As noted by V. P. Popov (2000), having won the Great Patriotic War, the USSR "accepted the challenge of the USA and joined in the fight for global domination" (p. 8), which has left its imprint on the entire second half of the 20th century.

After the war, the Soviet leaders took up tough power game both in the exterior (admittedly, just like the USA) and – which was much more important – in the domestic policy. In the country, they kept the following essential features of the "state of emergency" in the economy which were characteristic for the industrial breakthrough period and the war time. First of all, funds obtained at the expense of agriculture and inhabitant tax revenues were invested into industry, and basic industries were recognized to be the priority ones. Another trait was the complete lack of interest in earnings of the economic subjects. The market relations having developed during the war years were curtailed under the state pressure. They made labor legislation stricter, too. One more feature was achievement of the closed self-sustaining economy as one of the major objectives of the economic policy (Popov, 2000, p. 8).

It was the hardest "economic situation of the first years after the war, multiplied by the drought of 1946 and famine in a number of the country's districts" that contributed to maintaining and toughening the "extremely unequal" and "non-partner" relationships between the state and peasants (Verbitskaya, 2002, p. 23).

Studying the regional aspect of the problem of the post-war village will help conduct a more objective analysis of causes underlying such social disaster as the post-war famine, of the attitude to actions or failure to act of the central and local leaders for overcoming it, and overall evaluation of the agrarian policy of the second half of the 1940s.

### 2 Literature Review

Full-fledged studying of the post-war Russian village, including the famine of 1946–1947, only became possible with the change of the general historiographic situation in the USSR-Russia in the late 1980s – early 1990s. It can be concluded from works of V. F. Zima (1993, 1996) and V. P. Popov (2000, 2001) that the policy of a harder line on exploitation of the village against the

background of priority restoration and development of the military-industrial complex pursued by leaders of the USSR in the second half of the 1940s – early 1950s contributed to exacerbation of the social and economic crisis in the agrarian sphere.

Among the studies of regional problems of the post-war village at the level of Mordovia, let the works of V. A. Lomshin (2008), T. D. Nadkin (2010; Lomshin & Nadkin, 2009), and N. E. Goryachev (Goryachev N. E. & Goryachev A. E., 2020; Goryachev et al., 2020) be noted. The said research works discuss objective and subjective difficulties faced by the village in the period of restoration of the national economy, in particular, the drought and famine of 1946–1947, higher tax burden, lack of labor discipline, a new upsurge of repression during the "second dekulakization", and so on.

Results of the regional studies of the second half of the 20th – beginning of the 21st century, including ones of the history of the post-war Soviet village, were summarized in the multi-authored monograph edited by professor V. A. Yurchenkov "Mordovia in post-war period. 1945–1953" (2012, 2015).

Among the modern studies considering adjacent regions, there are notable works on everyday life of the village in the first years after the war: by D. V. Zagorodnev (2011) using the materials of Penza Region and by O. R. Khasyanov (2018) using the materials of Kuibyshev and Ulyanovsk Regions.

### 3 Research Methodological Framework

The objective of the research was to analyze the social disaster of famine in the post-war Soviet village in its regional dimension. There were the following research tasks: to identify principal causes of the post-war famine and demonstrate its scope within Mordovian ASSR; to consider the rural population's attitude to the situation in the village in the said period; to make the problem of the post-war famine relevant by means of surveys of the rural population of the modern Republic of Mordovia, including ones conducted by the authors of the paper.

The research tasks were completed owing to analyzing archive documents, recollections of residents of the rural areas about their post-war life, as well as scientific works of the well-known Russian researchers (Zima, 1993, 1996; Popov, 2000; et al.). Meanwhile, the research relies on the principle of historicism and the comparative historical, hermeneutic, and retrospective methods associated with it.

In the recollections recorded by V. A. Lomshin (2008, p. 174–374) and N. E. Goryachev (2019a, 2019b) (the co-author of this paper), clear judgments are found about the events taking place in life of the Soviet village in that period and about people's relationships with the local authorities, although this kind of sources has some individual disadvantages.

### 4 Results and Discussion

The famine affecting the greater part of area of Russia, the Ukraine, Moldavia, some regions of Belarus and Kazakhstan, according to V. F. Zima (1996, p. 11), was the consequence of three principal causes: post-war hardships, drought, and the food surplus requisitioning policy pursued toward kolkhozes and sovkhoses. In the USSR, about 100 million people starved (Zima, 1996, p. 11), with not less than 2 million people casualties of the famine and epidemics associated with it over 1946–1948 (Popov, 2000, p. 24). These were mainly the rural population (Zima, 1996, p. 170). At the same time, the drought and famine were not a factor for ceasing wheat exports or at least bringing them to the minimum: in 1946–1947, they amounted to 2,5 million tons, and in 1948 – 3,2 million tons (Zima, 1996, p. 149). The grain was sent both to the Western European countries as payment for the equipment supplied and as the

"fraternal assistance" to countries of the Eastern Europe. Moreover, the USSR had sufficient stock of wheat in the so-called state reserve (10 million tons of grain as of February 1, 1947), but it would be spent in limited quantities only (Zima, 1996, p. 34). As believed by V. F. Zima (1996), the post-war famine is completely congruent with the man-made type, just like the famine of 1932–1933 – that is, one having occurred due to the governing structures' fault, both in the center and locally (Zima, 1996, p. 127).

In spring – early summer of 1946, the thrust of drought affected the area of Mordovian ASSR, too. Even in the dry years of 1921 and 1924, there was more precipitation on its area than within the same period of 1946. As a result, in 1946, the area of the autonomous republic suffered from the sweeping famine, just like many regions of the USSR. Meanwhile, for a long time, the post-war famine (similarly to that of 1932–1933, the famine of the second half of the 1930s and during the war) has been underreported for ideological reasons.

One can judge about the scale of the post-war famine in villages of Mordovian ASSR by the information contained in the materials of meetings of district executive committees, by the data of the Ministry of Health of MASSR, by special messages of the minister of internal affairs to the chairman of the Council of Ministers of MASSR, N. Ya. Tingaev, as well as by numerous letters from the starving village to the army.

As an example, let some excerpts from the minutes of meeting of the executive committee of Krasnoslobodsk district Council of workers' deputies dated June 29, 1946, be quoted. At the meeting, they discussed the question of dystrophy incidence rate in the district. "According to the examination conducted with visiting residential settlements on June 25, 1946, in the district, there are people suffering from dystrophy in 229 families of the military killed in the line at the Great Patriotic War and the disabled ones, numbering 780 people, of them 33 people admitted to the district hospital. ... Further hospital admission of those suffering from dystrophy does not seem possible due to the district hospital being overcrowded ..." (Mordovia. 1941–1945, 1995, p. 728).

A similar situation was registered in a number of other districts of MASSR, too. For example, in Kadoshkino district, 260 people suffered from malnutrition, of which 30 % were admitted to hospital, and the total of 1 050 families were registered as ones needing urgent assistance. In Bolshoe Ignatovo district, families who were in desperate need of food were found to be 45 % of the total count (Central State Archive of the Republic of Mordovia, file 137, sheet 18). In some villages of Purdoshki district, up to 25 % of the population were ill (Central State Archive of the Republic of Mordovia, file 159, sheet 24).

Life was particularly hard for families whose fathers and sons were killed in action or were still in the ranks of the Red Army. In Ardatov, Ichalki, Bolshoe Ignatovo, and other districts, "reduced to the extreme need" members of families of the military gathered alms. Among them, there were: "in Bolshoe Ignatovo district, widows of the killed in action front-line soldiers E. I. Eryutina and B. I. Gorbunova; E. A. Aravaeva, a mother of three soldiers; in Ardatov district, P. F. Kozhaeva, an old-aged mother of four soldiers, and G. I. Starchkova, a mother of three soldiers" (Mordovia. 1941–1945, 1995, p. 730).

Alongside reports on the famine spread, requests about rendering urgent assistance were sent from the districts. However, leaders of the republic could only reply they had no possibility to meet them.

Due to the destructive consequences of the war and adverse natural conditions, in the first year after the war, the harvest of grain was small. It would have sufficed both for supplying food to the population in need and for providing seeds for sowing – with the stocks and reserves available in the country. However, traditionally, top priority was given to the tasks of fulfilling at all costs the state harvesting plans in grain crops, livestock breeding products, etc.

In the Central State Archive of the Republic of Mordovia (CSA RM), the fund of the Council of Ministers of MASSR contains excerpts from letters sent by residents of scores of villages and hamlets from 25 districts of Mordovian ASSR to the army who complained about food issues. Meanwhile, letters from 17 districts (Ardatov, Atyashevo, Atyurievo, Bolshoe Ignatovo, Elniki, Zubova Polyana, Kovylnino, Kozlovka, Krasnoslobodsk, Meltsany, Maidan, Purdoshki, Rybkino, Saransk, Staroye Shaigovo, Torbeevo, Tengushevo) mention specific facts of the lack of food, famine, and dystrophy cases. T. N. Kornienko, the minister of state security of MASSR, sent excerpts from the letters to the chairman of the Council of Ministers of MASSR, N. Ya. Tingaev (Central State Archive of the Republic of Mordovia, file 136-138).

To understand the entire severity of the situation of the starving peasants, let several excerpts from the said letters sent in spring-  
autumn of 1946 be quoted.

Here is an excerpt from M. I. Kirgizova's letter, Chukaly village of Kozlovka district (dated April 10): "I live very poorly, there's neither bread, nor potatoes. The children are starving. Come home quicker, or I'll put them in the orphanage, because I'm unable to bring them up. I send the children to beg, but they won't go" (Central State Archive of the Republic of Mordovia, file 137, sheet 299).

The letter by D. A. Kalabaeva, Sabancheevo village of Atyashevo district (dated May 15) notes: "Now, spring is close, leaves are coming out, and we start living off the land. There're only leaves to make the bread to eat. We'll probably die of them. Mitya doesn't go to school, because he has nothing to wear, shoes or clothes" (Central State Archive of the Republic of Mordovia, file 137, sheet 299).

Another excerpt, from A. Kurkova's letter, Letki village of Staroye Shaigovo district (dated June 16), says: "Our life is very bad. We haven't got a single piece of bread, a single potato. We're all lying down swollen and we're probably in for starving to death. And besides, they have set large taxes for us, and they come every day demanding payments. What shall we do? We don't have anything anyway, and they take the last liter of milk away" (Central State Archive of the Republic of Mordovia, file 137, sheet 52).

A. Kazakova from Belogorskoe village of Saransk district writes (dated August 23): "... We live very poorly, we've landed with no shoes or clothes, and hungry. The famine is severe here: there was a heavy drought, and no harvest. We're dying on leaves as the only food, and what we're going to do, we must be starving to death..." (Central State Archive of the Republic of Mordovia, file 137, sheet 225).

In her letter (dated September 5), E. P. Konkova, Kozlovka village of Insar district, comments: "Our life is not bad, but the local authorities push too hard on us. Last year, they took away our potatoes, and this year – nuts and linden bark. Vanya, we went all hungry to pick them, yet we did pick them for the tax. Then they came, six people, breaking a window in our house and entering by it, and they took it all away. Well, and if you say something to them, they will beat you in their own right" (Central State Archive of the Republic of Mordovia, file 137, sheet 309).

I. Tryapkin, Kulikovo village of Torbeevo district, notes in his letter (dated October 9): "I report about Your mother. Her life with the orphans is bad. Your father died for the Motherland, leaving behind orphans – You, the small children, and the martyr of a mother. Well, you have left for defending the Motherland now, leaving your blood brothers, sisters, and mother to starve here... In winter your family will die of cold, your mother is crying day and night... If you have pity for them, do come. It would be pardonable in the Ukraine, in Belarus, where the Germans robbed, but it is not pardonable here" (Central State Archive of the Republic of Mordovia, file 137, sheet 165).

The authorities paid particularly close attention to the situation of families of the disabled soldiers and those killed in action. As noted in the documents, their economic conditions were quite hard (Mordovia. 1941–1945, 1995, p. 729-730). So, according to the information of the Ministry of Social Provision of MASSR, as of April 1, 1947, in 17 districts, there were 1 260 families of this category who had members suffering from dystrophy (Central State Archive of the Republic of Mordovia, file 136, sheet 136).

The difficult situation in the village in winter – spring of 1947 in terms of food supplies and the famine is also described in the letters they kept sending to the army.

So, N. G. Abradina, Redkodubye village of Ardatov district, writes in her letter (dated January 3): "Darling son, here people have started dying, they work a lot, but they have no nutrition. There's no bread. They live on potatoes only while they work more than horses, they haul firewood and hay on their own" (Central State Archive of the Republic of Mordovia, file 138, sheet 166).

Another excerpt, from a letter signed as Bormotova, Insar village (dated January 21), says: "Hello, dear son Kolya! My life is very hard, we've got no bread for a long time, we're running out of potatoes, the kids have no shoes and nothing to wear. And what's next, I wonder? It's as good as running somewhere blindfolded. There's no survivor assistance at all. No-one even asks how I live with the orphans" (Central State Archive of the Republic of Mordovia, file 138, sheet 170).

In the memory of the rural population, the post-war years occupy a special place; this is confirmed by surveys of residents of districts of the Republic of Mordovia conducted by V. A. Lomshin (2008, p. 174-374) in 2004 and by N. E. Goryachev (2019a, 2019b) in 2015–2020. Materials of the interviews supplement the letters of 1946–1947 sent from villages of Mordovia to the army, from archives, and published collections of documents about the hard conditions of labor in kolkhozes, the lack of food products, the famine, and diseases, which are available for researchers.

The memory about the first two years after the war being extremely hard has not faded until nowadays. So, N. E. Katyshov, born in Podvernika village of Staroye Shaigovo district, recalls: "The hardest years were 1946–1947, the hungry years. We would eat all herbs, horsetail, sorrel, garden radish; we would mix orache with potatoes adding some flour to make flatbread of it" (Goryachev, 2019a). This is also confirmed by V. P. Ryabysheva, a female resident of the same village: "We would live on berries, edible herbs, orache with flour and potatoes. During the war and afterwards, there was almost no harvest of potatoes; even if there was any, the potatoes were very small, and they were like rare, instead chicken eggs" (Goryachev, 2019b). One more woman, O. I. Egorova who lived in Krasnopolye village of Torbevo district says: "It was 1947 that was the hardest year. It was very hard to make it through the time of famine, we would swell, eat orache and some gruel. At times, we had completely nothing to eat for three straight days. Many people would die" (Lomshin, 2008, p. 228). Let it be noted that the peasants' memory has saved several years of starvation. So, I. G. Baranov, a resident of Torbevo village mentioned the hungry pre-war, war, and post-war years. "Not everyone has survived this. Children would die – some people had two, others five dead, and not always could they know why exactly...", he notes (Lomshin, 2008, p. 189). N. G. Veshkin, a resident of Atyurievo village, recalls: "The hungry years were 1935–36 and 1946–48. People starved. There was no food. They would eat orache, starch. People would sell their houses and go away to look for a job. Over a half of the village suffered from dystrophy, and very many people died" (Lomshin, 2008, p. 208).

It is quite difficult to restore the number of Mordovia's post-war famine victims. It can be seen from classified reports to the government that in spring and summer of 1946, the incidence of alimentary dystrophy spread within the RSFSR, affecting many districts of Voronezh Region, Gorky, Kostroma, Kursk,

Novgorod, Oryol, Pskov, Saratov, Tambov, Ulyanovsk, Chita, and other regions, as well as districts of Bashkir, Buryat-Mongolian, Mordovian, and Tatar Autonomous SSR.

The famine affected rural population to a greater extent. With regard to this, the information provided by the historian V. F. Zima (1993, p. 36-37) for some of the above regions in 1947 can be cited. According to his data, the number of dystrophy patients amounted to 250 thousand people in Voronezh Region, 104,6 thousand people – in Ulyanovsk Region, 67,5 thousand people – in Tambov Region, 30 thousand people – in Kostroma Region, and 35 thousand people – in Bashkir ASSR. V. A. Lomshin (2008, p. 50), gives the data that in Mordovian ASSR, the number of those suffering from dystrophy reached 76 thousand people in 1946–1948.

Thus, the information given in historical studies, the data of archive documents, and interviews of the eye-witnesses of the said events confirm the conclusion about the post-war years being among the hardest ones for residents of the rural areas of Mordovian ASSR. The massive famine affected both life and health of scores of thousands of peasants, becoming one of the tragic pages in the post-war history and etching itself on the memory of the region's population forever.

## 5 Conclusion

Survey participants coming from villages of Mordovia well remember that after the war, people died of hunger and concomitant diseases on a massive scale, and there were many children among them. D. Ya. Bocharov, a resident of Urusovo village of Ardatov district, remembers those years as follows: "In the hungry years, we've survived thanks to the cow, so there were no deaths in the family. In our village, many fellow dwellers had no livestock of their own, and so 360 people died of dystrophy" (Lomshin, 2008, p. 202). A woman who lived in Vysha village of Zubova Polyana district notes: "So many people died of dystrophy, especially children. My own child died of starvation" (Lomshin, 2008, p. 298). A. F. Petrushkin, a resident of Pilesevo village of Atyashevo district, says: "The hungry years of 1946–1947 were caused by the harvest failure and the authorities' policy. It was mainly children who died of dystrophy" (Lomshin, 2008, p. 313).

The rebound was the outflow of the young people from rural areas through both legal and illegal channels, which aggravated after the war. Many young men would not come back home after the compulsory service in the army – they would stay for extended service or leave for construction sites. Young women tried to obtain passports and go to the city by all means. Young families would enlist for peat mining or urban construction (Central State Archive of the Republic of Mordovia, file 137, sheet 3-50).

The post-war famine was not only a consequence of the hard years of the war, drought and harvest failure of 1946, but it also resulted from the policy of the USSR leaders who used resources of kolkhozes and kolkhoz peasants for solving the issues having accumulated – without considering the famine that affected more and more villages and hamlets.

In conditions of the post-war famine, it was apparent that the Stalin-style kolkhoz system had exhausted its capacities. The repression measures for reinforcing labor discipline would prove inefficient, too. What they had to do was to profoundly modify the system of relationships between the state and peasants – but not to step up repressions against rural workers and not to put more state pressure on the village.

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