

## RUSSIAN FAMINES: A COMPARISON

[We print below a graphic picture by Tolstoy of the initial stages of the great Russian famine in 1891, and immediately thereafter recent accounts from the Moscow Pravda and Isvestiya of the present famine in the same region.]

### IN 1891

I HAVE just visited four counties affected by crop failure. The first was Krapivensky County, the most fertile portions of which were hit the hardest.

The first indication of scarcity is the fact that practically the whole population is using bread made of flour mixed with *lebeda* — a weed-grass, sometimes used as food when people are starving. The proportion of the two ingredients runs from one-third of *lebeda* to half again as much. The bread made out of the mixture is black as ink, heavy, and bitter. This bread is eaten by all, even by those who are ill; by children, by pregnant women.

There is also a shortage of fuel. As early as September the peasants hereabouts had nothing to burn. They go long distances for wood, seven and even nineteen versts.

It is evident that conditions are very bad; and yet, when you look at the people, you wonder at their apparent health. They are all at work. Landowners told me they could not get enough help. I visited a village in this country where they were digging potatoes and threshing oats. I also noticed that the use of *lebeda* bread was not altogether due to starvation.

At the first home where I was shown *lebeda* bread, I saw a thresher at work on oats, of which that family had about sixty stacks, each worth about three hundred rubles. They were short of rye, but they had a good crop of potatoes. The reason why they were eating *lebeda* bread was because the head of the family, a thrifty old peasant,

thought it wise economy. 'Others are eating *lebeda* bread,' he said to me; 'why should n't my people eat it, too?'

As I continued my journey into Bogoroditsky County, conditions became worse. I found less and less food and more of the desperately situated peasant households. On the very boundary of Efremovsky County, even the potato crop has failed. The best land has returned scarcely more than just the seed. The bread almost everywhere is mixed with *lebeda*. And it is even poorer than in the previous county; it nauseates you if you try to eat it without anything else.

But even these villages are not the worst. Still more desperate is the situation in Efremovsky and Epifansky counties. I have visited a large village in Efremovsky County. Of its seventy households, only ten are still living on their own supplies. Half of the other houses are empty: their former occupants are out begging. Those who have remained eat *lebeda* bread, or else bread mixed with bran. A woman told me how her little girl became sick after she ate *lebeda* bread; but there was no other to give her.

We stopped at the last house in the village, and a ragged, emaciated woman came out of the door and told us of her situation. Of her five children, the oldest is ten. Two of her children are sick, with the influenza, most probably. A three-year child is also ill; she had brought him out and laid him on the bare ground, with just some rags thrown over him. The child is uncomfortable and the ground he lies on is damp, but still it is better than to leave

him in the tiny hut with the other four children. The woman's husband had gone away to get food and had dropped out of sight. Now she feeds herself and her children with the crusts she gets as charity. But even that is not such an easy matter. The neighborhood is very poor. She has to go twenty and thirty versts to beg, and then she has to take the children with her. She goes from place to place until she gets enough crusts to last her and her family for a day or two. Then she stays home with the children, until the supplies begin to give out. When I stopped at her hut, she had enough crusts to last her for another day at the most.

There are many villages like the one I have just described. But there are some that are even worse.

Here is one of them. We traveled for about six versts through deserted country before we came to the first hut of this village. It is situated on the banks of a large and beautiful river, on the other side of which is a larger village. The first hut to which I came consisted merely of four stone walls smeared with clay and covered over by old boards, upon which dried potato stalks are piled. There is no yard. In front of the hut stands a wagon without wheels. Next to the wagon is a little clearing, on which the whole oat-crop has just been threshed. A tall peasant with a shovel in his hands scoops the oats into a sieve, from which they fall into a basket. A woman of fifty or more carries the baskets of oats to the wagon and drops them into it. The peasant is a relative of the woman, who is a widow, and has come to help her with her work. Her husband died two years ago, and her son is away in the army. Her whole crop for the year consists of the oats, of which there are just about enough to fill the wagon. Nothing else was planted. The *lebeda* bread the woman had baked was so bad that it could not

be used. So now she goes to a neighboring village and collects crusts and pieces of bread. That morning she had gone to a village in which there had been some celebration or other, and got together four or five pounds of bread baked without any *lebeda*. She showed me the basket that contained these pieces of dry and mud-covered crusts — all the food-resources of the family for an indefinite time to come.

The next hut has a better roof and a small yard. Its occupants had gathered a small crop of rye. A bagful of *lebeda* stood in the entrance-room as we came in. There were no oats, for there had been no seed that spring. A small crop of potatoes had been gathered. The available resources, counting potatoes and rye-*lebeda* bread would last for possibly a month. What would come after that nobody knew. There was a family of six in that hut.

The whole village of thirty households is in this situation, with the exception of two households which are somewhat better off.

Before I left the village, I stopped to talk to a peasant who had just returned from a field. Soon a half-dozen peasants gathered around, and we had a general conversation. Several women were standing at a distance, listening to us. Children, chewing black, sticky *lebeda* bread, moved about us, gazing at me in curiosity. I put some questions to them, and they told me of their poverty.

'How is it that you are in such bad shape, worse than others?' I asked them.

There was an instant chorus of replies:—

'What are you going to do? Last summer half of the village burned, as if a cow had licked off the earth. And this summer, there are no crops. And it's getting worse all the time.'

'But what are you going to do?'

'Just as God wills. We'll sell what we can; and then just live.'

What does this mean? Is it possible that these people do not understand their own condition? Or do they trust so much to help from the outside, that they will not make a move to help themselves?

I recall meeting two elderly peasants from Efremovsky County, who, in answer to my question about their crops, replied that they were not badly off, because they had received enough for seed and some for food. But it is perfectly apparent that these peasants will not be able to live through the coming winter, unless they do something to help themselves. The question is, are they going to do anything? Scarcely one of them seems to understand the situation. Is it that they really cannot grasp their real plight? Or do they put all their trust in outside assistance? Or are they like children who have fallen through a hole in the ice, and are merely laughing over the novelty of the situation, not realizing yet the danger that threatens them?

#### IN 1921

At the station of Aktubinskaya I saw an old man pick up from the ground a piece of hardened mud and eat it.

All along the fifteen hundred versts of railroad lines from the Volga basin, through the Kirgiz Republic and across Turkestan, hundreds of thousands of such old men, as well as women, children, and even able-bodied men, move on in a sort of elemental way.

They do not beg for bread. They now beg only for 'any good-for-nothing' dried-up piece of crust. Without any complaint, they move on to the limitless land, in which there are people, bread, and compassion. Their heavy, self-centred silence is broken only by words of entreaty.

Another scene comes to me, another

page from the book of sorrow that tells the story of the past few years. It was in the autumn of 1916. As I was approaching the Polessye districts in Western Russia, I saw all along the railroad tracks endless rows of crosses. They marked the graves of the refugees, who swept into the interior of Russia like a wave — a constantly decreasing wave, that left in its wake the mournful rows of crosses. These crosses stood like a second line of sheds protecting the railway against the drifting snow. And neither the resources of the country, which were tremendous in comparison with what they are now, nor the then existing mighty organizations for relief, could save the masses of refugees who fled from the scourge of war.

Who can even imagine the number of people already perishing from starvation and cholera along the railroad lines alone, considering our present impoverishment, which is fearful beyond description, but which is nevertheless understood, even by the starving peasantry? And it is because they understood this, that the peasants do not complain, but merely beg, pray for help.

A peasant in the government of Samara told me of how they make *lebeda* bread. Here is the story.

In our village they take some linden leaves and grass, chop them up to the size of a flea, and then boil the mixture. After the water has boiled, they squeeze it out and put the stuff again into boiling water. Then they let the water run off through a sieve, and keep the mass until it is dry. After that, they grind it fine and add one third flour. The bread you get is green in color and indigestible. And when there is no flour, they just bake the ground mixture as it is. It does not taste very badly; but after a man eats it for a while he swells up and gets worms in his stomach, and soon after that he dies.

It is necessary to make every effort to put a stop to this unorganized exo-

dus of peasants from the Volga region. Otherwise three-fourths of the refugees will perish, and many of the settled population of the districts through which they move may also fall a prey to epidemics. The extraordinary difficulty of controlling this exodus makes almost impossible any help by the state or by relief organizations. It would be necessary to keep large stocks of food-supplies over a huge territory to take care of the refugees as they appear. And we neither have, nor can possibly have, such stores at the present time.

Kazan, the largest industrial centre of the Volga region, lies in ruins as if it had been in the zone of heavy fighting only a few days ago. Scorched by the burning sun, filthy, dusty, with torn streets and dilapidated houses, almost depopulated, it presents a painful appearance. Nowhere are there indications of reconstruction. Even the central part of the city remains untouched.

From early last spring, the weather in this part of Russia was hot and dry with the exception of three rainy days — May 4, 9, and 18. All hope of a tolerable crop soon vanished. By July even the winter crops had been utterly destroyed, while land sowed in the spring was so scorched that it was black in many places.

Most of the people throughout this district have already consumed the last remnants of the food they had in reserve. Even young children are already being fed on bark, acorns, and grass. Thirty or forty pounds of acorn flour cost 80,000 to 100,000 rubles. Poor peasants, and even some of those better off, are selling their cattle, nailing up their cabins, and piling all their belongings on wagons, starting out aimlessly in search of food. Hundreds of such travelers are camping on the banks of the Volga, apparently waiting for a

steamer to come along and pick them up. They are rapidly falling a prey to various diseases, or dying of starvation.

At the railroad station of Novo-Sergeyevskaya some 800 miles from Moscow, we met 1500 workmen from the city of Orekhov-Zuyev on their way to purchase food-supplies at Tashkent, the capital of Turkestan. They were thoroughly discouraged, although they were but half-way to their destination.

Traveling conditions are abominable. They have been detained for long periods at wayside stations without any conveniences, even an opportunity to procure hot water. Food costs so much along the line, that goods they had brought to barter at Tashkent were already leaking away.

Ordinarily the journey from Orekhov-Zuyev to Novo-Sergeyevskaya takes two days; but these workmen had been eleven days en route. Already they had been obliged to barter away nearly half of the merchandise they had with them for food. It will take eleven and possibly sixteen days before they reach Tashkent, and after that they will have their long, painful journey home to their starving families, possibly empty-handed.

As illustrating the variations in prices at different places, at the Novo-Sergeyevsk. coöperative, a pood of flour exchanges for twenty-four arshin of cotton cloth; while in Tashkent a pood of flour may be had for six arshin of cloth, though the price of the former may rise with the crowding-in of buyers from the famine areas. Again at the neighboring Aulietin and Chimkent districts, a pood of flour may be bought for two and a half arshin of cotton cloth. However, this variation of prices is not known to the peasants and workingmen who are abroad hunting for food. They flock to the large centres, where they are sure to

receive the lowest price in provisions for the merchandise they have to exchange.

From the city of Orekhov-Zuyevo alone, no less than nine parties, containing in all 13,500 workers, have gone

forth in search of food. They will lose, at a moderate calculation, 567,000 working-days, while at best they are not likely to bring back provisions to support them more than three months, and that most inadequately.

## ON THE EVE OF THE TRAGEDY. III

BY BARON GAIFFIER D'HESTROY

*[The following article by a distinguished Belgian diplomat, who was political director of the Belgian Foreign Office in 1914, continues the descriptions of incidents in European capitals attending the outbreak of the war, of which we published installments in our issues of August 6 and August 13.]*

From *La Revue de France*, September 1  
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LIKE my colleagues of the diplomatic corps, I was away on vacation during the last week of July, 1914. That is sufficient to show the extent to which Germany and Austria had succeeded in lulling our suspicions. I was sojourning in the Engadine with my family, at a quiet remote point, where we were practically cut off from news. The Swiss hotel proprietors, anxious to keep their guests as long as possible, bulletined scarcely a telegram. Three days after Austria delivered its ultimatum to Serbia, I telegraphed to Brussels for instructions. I received a reply on Tuesday evening, the 28th of July, from our Minister of Foreign Affairs, instructing me to return at once, and I left on the morning of Wednesday, the 29th.

At Pontresina, homeward-bound Germans and Austrians fairly stormed the train. By the merest accident I met M. Solvay, our great manufacturer, who was returning to Belgium and

courteously offered me accommodations in his private car. At Basel he asked me to dine with him at the Hotel Euler, where he had invited several German manufacturers to meet him. The latter affected to scoff at the possibility of war, and did their best to convince us of Germany's peaceable intentions.

That night, when we passed through Strassburg, I observed several trains packed with soldiers in the railway yards. All bridges and tunnels in the vicinity of Metz were under military guard. At Arlon we found the first Belgian reservists hastening to join their regiments. In fact my government had decided the previous evening to put the country in a state of defense.

Immediately upon arriving at Brussels, on the morning of July 30, I hastened to the Foreign Office for news. The dispatches from Berlin from our Minister, my old friend Baron Beyens,