CHAPTER 2
FAMINE RELIEF 1921-1923

Despite the scare caused by the Red Terror - the bloody suppression of all counter revolutionary activities by the Bolsheviks - the United States extended a helping hand to the Russian people when they were faced with a severe famine. The general feeling of revulsion against the Bolshevik regime was temporarily cast aside to save the Russian people.

Causes of the Famine

The famine that broke out in Russia in 1919 was partly the outcome of the refusal of the peasants to till the soil for a state which forced them to surrender all the surplus foodstuffs raised. The peasants had to hand over to the government at a fixed price everything that they produced in excess of their own requirements. In return, they were "entitled to receive from the government two-thirds the value of their delivered surplus in kind - cloth, oil, salt and other commodities" that they needed. The government, however, was unable to supply the wants of the peasants. The latter, therefore, refused to deliver the surplus foodstuffs to the government and either concealed them or disposed of them illegally. The government's policy, moreover, took away from the peasants the incentive to plant crops. They, therefore, reduced their area of cultivation and produced no more than was needed for bare subsistence. (1) This resulted in a

reduction of grain production to a near-starvation level for the nation. Livestock raising also declined to at most 30 percent of the pre-war level primarily due to lack of fodder. Some seven years of war, social turmoil, foreign intervention and blockade were capped by a severe drought in 1920-1921. The impact of this additional disaster finally brought a tragedy that shocked human conscience. The area most affected by the drought was the south-eastern portion, particularly, the section around the lower Volga - an area that was known as the granary of Russia. Apart from this area, the southern part of Ukraine was also stricken with famine. (2) "Roughly speaking the famine area represented one-twentieth part of Russia; but in that part it provided not less than one half of the Russian harvest." (3)

(2) Outside Russia nothing was known of the extent of the famine in Southern Ukraine. This may have been by design of the Soviet Government. As Fisher puts it, the Soviet Government "actively discouraged" everything that was likely to bring the foreigners "in contact with the Ukraine" to prevent them from being aware of "the Ukrainian situation." Of the two famine areas - the Volga and the Ukraine - "the Volga famine involved a greater area and more people." The Soviet Government, therefore, decided upon "focusing all efforts on the Volga" and "ignoring the Ukraine" in the belief that "since it was unlikely that there would be enough food to supply both regions, it was better to handle one job well, than to try to handle two and fail." Cf. Ibid., 261, 264.

(3) 113 Commercial and Financial Chronicle (July - September, 1921) 451.
In the absence of adequate reserves of food and of transportation facilities to carry what was available to the famine stricken regions, the Soviet Government was quite unable to cope with the situation. By the middle of summer 1921, famine was raging throughout the Volga valley and millions were threatened with death. (4)

According to various estimates, some 5,000,000 people died in the famine. Aid from abroad became urgent and it was to the United States that the Soviet authorities turned. There was, however, no request for aid addressed to the United States Government by the Soviet Government. On the other hand, Maxim Gorky, the well-known Russian author, appealed to the American people to save the starving millions in Russia. "This appeal ... probably was the result of a compromise ... between the Die Hards," who were opposed to aid from the "capitalists", and "the more flexible and humane opportunists, who could see no advantage in the survival of Communism if Russia were ruined in the process." The compromise, perhaps, lay "in the manner in which the appeal was made. The Soviet Government itself did not ... ask for help," but "allowed ... Maxim Gorky to do so." (5)

Gorky's message, dated July 13, 1921, "was addressed 'to all honest people', told of the crop failure which


(5) Fisher (n. 1) 51.
threatened starvation to millions of Russians, and ended with the appeal, 'I ask all honest European and American people for prompt aid to the Russian people. Give bread and medicine.' (6)

American Aid to Famine-Stricken Russia

The American Relief Administration (ARA)

In reply to Gorky's appeal, the Secretary of Commerce in the Harding Cabinet and Director of European Relief during the war, Herbert Hoover, sent him a cable on July 23, 1921, clearly stating that "to the whole American people the absolute sine qua non of any assistance must be the immediate release of the Americans held prisoners in Russia and adequate provision for administration." He also asked for full liberty of the relief workers to carry on their activities in Russia without Soviet interference. "Once these steps have been taken", he stated, "the American Relief Administration (ARA) . . . have funds in hand by which assistance for the children and for the sick could be undertaken immediately." (7)

At the same time, Hoover gave the undertaking that the representatives and assistants of the ARA in Russia would not engage in any political activities. The non-political character of this message probably convinced the Russians of the sincerity of the American offer, and on July 25, 1921, Gorky announced its acceptance by the Soviet Government. The formal acceptance was transmitted on July 31, signed by Kamenev as Chairman of the Commission of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee for

(6) 2 For. Rela. 1921 (Washington, GPO, 1936) 805.

(7) Fisher (n. 1) 52.
Helping the Famine Stricken Population. (8)

The Riga Agreement

Kamenev suggested that negotiations for relief agreement be begun as soon as possible. In response to this suggestion, Walter Lyman Brown, Chief of the ARA Mission in Poland and Maxim Litvinov met in Riga on August 10, 1921, to work out the terms of the agreement under which the ARA was to carry on its operations in Russia. There was some controversy over the principle of freedom of action of the ARA in Russia affecting the right to form local committees for the distribution of relief. Litvinov contended that "Russia was in a state of disturbance and revolt and that there were no neutrals in the country." He also contended that "the creation of organizations outside the control of the Soviet Government might result in counter-revolutionary projects under the guise of relief committees. Brown, on the other hand, emphatically declared that the ARA did not intend and would not tolerate on the part of its American representatives or its Russian Committees, any political activity whatever." He made it clear that the "sole object of the ARA was to save as many lives as possible." (9) Brown's endeavour was to prevent the ARA from being "used for political purposes by any party, either Communist or anti-Communist." (10) In the discussions, "the words 'food is a weapon' were constantly on Litvinov's lips. Recognition of the truth

(8) Ibid., 53.
(9) Ibid., 60.
(10) Ibid., 61.
of this was at bottom the principal difficulty in the
differences of opinion in regard to the control of relief.
The Soviets had no idea of allowing food they did not control
to be used against them. The ARA on the other hand, was
equally determined not to allow the Communists to withhold
or bestow American food as punishment or reward for politi-
cal activity." (11) President Harding and his Cabinet, while re-
fraining from any official participation, were also agreed
that the ARA must have exclusive and unhampered control over
the distribution of food. (12)

The difficulties were, however, finally overcome, thanks
to the skill and judgement of Brown and Litvinov and the
agreement was signed on August 20, 1921. (13) Litvinov ex-
pressed the hope that the meeting would be a precedent for
further Russian-American negotiations. The United States
Government, however, held that the agreement was solely with
the ARA and was entirely non-political and in no sense re-
presented a change in its policy towards Soviet Russia.

On September 3, 1921, Colonel William N. Haskell sailed
from New York with a large staff to take charge of relief
activities. Food was soon moving into Russia from Western
Europe and active preparations were begun in the United States
for the launching of an energetic campaign to raise funds.

(11) Ibid., 62.


(13) For. Rel. (n. 6) 817. For the text of the Riga
Agreement, see Appendix I.
American Motives

Hoover was subjected to severe attacks from the liberal circles in the United States which believed that ARA was pursuing an ulterior motive in going into Russia to succor the starving population. The liberals suspected Hoover's motives in giving relief to Russia since he was known to be a staunch enemy of Bolshevism. (14)

Hoover's remark to Secretary of State Hughes that "the relief measures will build a situation which, combined with other factors, will enable the Americans to undertake the leadership in the reconstruction of Russia when the proper moment arrives" was significant. He left no doubt as to his main concern when he said, "the hope of our commerce lies in the establishment of American firms abroad, distributing American goods under American direction; in the building of direct American financing and above all, in the installation of American technology in Russian industries". Hughes looked upon the ARA as a convenient source for obtaining information regarding Russia. "Full information will be obtained this way", he explained, "without the risk of complication through government action." (15)

The Soviet leaders were not altogether unaware of these aims. It was, therefore, only natural that they were sceptical as to American motives and many hindrances were conse-

(14) Fisher (n. 1) 55.

(15) Hughes to Herrick, September 2, 1921, NA, RG 59 file 861.48/1601.
ently thrown in the path of the ARA. It was feared that philanthropy might be used with greater effectiveness than machine guns in attaining political ends. Supplying famished people with American canned goods was considered as effective as the dispatch of occupational troops. According to the Soviet historian Rubinshtein, "the aim of the diplomacy of condensed milk" was the creation of "relief committees made up of counter-revolutionaries, anti-Soviet elements, to send to Soviet Russia a whole army of spies and undercover agents." (16)

Although this contention might be disputed, some observers were inclined to believe that American aid to famine-stricken Russia was dictated not so much by humanitarian as by other considerations which were likely to serve her interests. Although there were conflicting views about American motives, there is no doubt that there existed during that time an attitude of hostility among most Americans toward Soviet Russia. Russia's desertion of her allies at a critical time during the war had antagonised the Americans. The latter regarded the Bolsheviks as not merely having betrayed their allies and bartered their country for German gold, but worse, for they attacked property, religion and the sanctity of the home. This anti-Russian feeling was

quickened by the Red Terror in Russia. The scare which it
caus ed in the United States resulting in an anti-red crusade
in 1919-1921, served to intensify American hostility against
the Bolsheviks. (17)

The opposition of certain sections in the United
States to relief measures for the victims of famine in Russia
was, however, not merely due to hostility against the Bolsheviks.
It was based on other grounds also. At the time when the ARA
was contemplating relief work in Russia, the United States
itself was faced with unemployment, insolvencies, and an
acute agricultural distress. All these were the result of
the collapse of the European market after the end of the
first world war. The number of unemployed was variously
estimated to be between 3,500,000 and 5,500,000 by September
1921 (18) and the price of wheat during that period had
fallen from $2.15 to $1.44 a bushel. Being thus forced
to sell their products at ruinously low prices and buy what
they needed at high prices, the farmers were badly affected.

(17) Among the happenings which left their mark on
the public mind were the bomb outrages of May and June 1919;
the Red Crusade led by Attorney General Palmer toward the end
of 1919; the deportations in the 'Soviet Ark' in December 1919;
the expulsion of Hartens, the Soviet representative in the
United States in January 1921; and the deportation of more
Reds in January 1921. Cf. Post, L.F., The Deportation Delirium of
Nineteen Twenty (Chicago, Kerr & Co., 1923).

(18) Department of Commerce, Report of the
President's Conference on Unemployment (Washington, GPO,
1927) 37.
Besides, the winter of 1921-22 promised to bring despair, hunger, and cold to many thousands in America, for the unemployed, who had gone through the preceding winter on their savings, faced the coming months without resources. The care of these destitutes was obviously the first duty of the American people, and this was widely recognised and reflected in the press. One editor gave expression to the thought in thousands of American minds when he wrote, "If there are going to be any drives, let them be for funds to feed, clothe and shelter several million perfectly good Americans who are going to have pretty tough sledding during the coming winter unless all signs fail". Senator Stafford also opposed Russian relief measures stating that there was likely to be suffering in the United States during the winter of 1921-22 and in that event "are we to deny relief at home and vote the people's money to the relief of those who are suffering abroad because of the bad government of their making." (19)

But Hoover explained that the food supplies which were to be sent to Russia were "all in surplus in the United States, and without a market in any quarter of the globe... From an economic point of view there is no loss to America in exporting these foodstuffs for relief purposes". (20)

Hoover, however, recognized that Americans would accept the idea of Russian relief only if they realized that provision was made first for their own situation. Hoover favoured an authorization by the Congress of "about $20,000,000" for Russian relief. He believed that if this amount was used "to buy food supplies from the American farmers, the result would be beneficial not only to the Russians, but to the American farmers" in disposing of their surplus and to the "labourers as well."

He estimated that "purchases to this amount, while not in themselves a striking total, would, particularly in corn where the greatest trouble lay, sweep the market of distress, liquidate sales, and give the farmer a chance." These purchases would, moreover, "convince prospective buyers - especially foreign buyers who had been holding off - that the period of liquidation was over. They would resume purchasing, causing an increase in farm values all along the line. This increase, in turn, would be reflected in increased purchasing of manufactured articles by the farmers, which would improve the industrial situation and so contribute to the solution of the unemployment problem. The Government appropriation would thus indirectly put an end to the tragic anomaly of the farmers of one part of the world using food grain for fuel,
while farmers of another part of the world were starving." "Charity both at home and abroad" would be served thereby. (21)

**Congressional Appropriation for Famine Relief**

A bill (H.R. 9548) was introduced on December 10, 1921, "for the relief of the distressed and starving people of Russia". (22) It was referred to the Committee on Foreign Relations and originally proposed an appropriation of $10,000,000. This was, however, later raised to $20,000,000 at the suggestion of James P. Goodrich, a former Governor of Indiana, who had made an independent survey of the famine conditions in Russia.

At the hearings on Russian Relief, Goodrich stated that $20,000,000 would be "enough to meet the supreme necessities of the famine". He arrived at this estimate after an investigation made "from a comparison of statistics obtained from the commissar of agriculture at Moscow, from the commissars of the various provinces . . . and from the records . . . obtained in the various communes (he) visited". (23) Goodrich also proposed that 20,000,000 bushels of corn and 5,000,000 bushels of wheat be sent to Russia. (24) He believed that if the Russian peasants were furnished with enough "to enable them to plant all the ground they have sow-

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(21) Fisher (n. 1) 145-146.
(22) 62 CR (n. 19) 565.
(23) H. Com. on For. Rel., Hearings (n. 20) 9-10.
(24) Ibid., 7.
ed, ready for planting, Russia will with a normal rainfall, have a surplus of foodstuffs next year (1922)." (25)

This measure for Russian relief was also supported by Samuel Gompers, President of the American Federation of Labour who felt that there was "a real dire necessity" (26) for it. He wanted, however, to be sure that the ARA would be in absolute control of the funds appropriated for "relief of the famine stricken people of Russia" and that "it would not be taken over to help the existing regime in Russia". (27) Carl S. Vrooman, a former Assistant Secretary of the Department of Agriculture, and Ralph Synder, representing the American Farm Bureau Federation, also supported the measure from a "broad humanitarian standpoint". (28) The bill (H.R. 9548) read, in part, as follows.

That the President is hereby authorized through such agency or agencies as he may designate to purchase, transport and distribute corn, seed grain and preserved milk for the relief of the distressed and starving people of Russia and for spring planting in areas where seed grains have been exhausted.

(25) Ibid., 10.
(26) Ibid., 40.
(27) Ibid., 41.
(28) Ibid., 47.
The President is authorized to expand or cause to be expended out of the funds of the United States Grain Corporation a sum not exceeding $20,000,000, or so much thereof as may be necessary for the purpose of carrying out the provisions of this act. (29)

The amount that was made available for the famine relief was intended to be spent only in the Volga region. Thus when Carl J. Mayer, American Trade Commissioner in Vladivostock wired for $200,000 to be made available to him for the purchase of food and warm clothings for the suffering people in that area, he was informed that "the Congressional appropriation is not being used for Russian refugees anywhere, but only for Russians in the Volga Basin." (30)

It may be noted that the amount of $20,000,000 appropriated by the Congress was made payable out of the funds of the United States Grain Corporation - actually from its profits. As Senator Linthicum stated,

We are appropriating this money, it is true, but this fund is payable from the United States Grain Corporation fund . . . Out of the investment (of $1,000,000,000) in the United States Grain Corporation $65,000,000 have remained as profits, and this $20,000,000 will be paid out of that $65,000,000. (31)

Thus the appropriation by the Congress for the famine stricken people of Russia did not impose any additional direct burden upon the American taxpayer as it was paid out

(29) 62 CR (n.19) 565.

(30) H. Dotterer to C.A. Mayer, January 17. 1922, NA, RG 151, File 448 Famine.

(31) 62 CR (n.19) 456.
of the profits of an investment. There were three amendments to this bill of which the last two required that the food supplied should be transported in American vessels, and that the supplies should be purchased in the United States. From these amendments, it appears that strong pressure was brought to bear upon the Congressmen by both the farming and shipping interests and that the measures for Russian relief received their support because they stood to benefit by them. The shipping interests viewed the program as a source of emergency revenue and the farm group saw in the projected federal purchase of grain stocks a partial solution for the loss of their war sponsored foreign markets. Obtaining immediate income was a matter of no small concern to the farmers at a time when the demand for their products had declined considerably, while the supply remained high and prospects of obtaining foreign markets were gloomy. (32)

Representative Sabath speaking on Russian relief stated on December 17, 1921,

though it may appear we are asked to give a large sum of money, it will not only come back to us a thousand fold but will create a greater demand for our surplus products and grains that the farmer has found impossible to sell anywhere near the cost of production. . . It will stimulate the export of these commodities and thus afford relief not only to the suffering farmer but to the entire Nation as well. (33)


(33) 62 CR (n.19) 454.
Certain sections in the United States might have supported the Russian relief measures because they benefited by them. But the real sentiment of the American people was, perhaps, echoed by President Harding in his message to the Congress on December 6, 1921 when he said,

I am sure there is room in the sympathetic thought of America for fellow human beings who are suffering and dying of starvation in Russia. A severe drought in the valley of the Volga has plunged 15,000,000 people into grievous famine... Unless relief is afforded the loss of life will extend into many millions. America cannot be deaf to such a call as that. We do not recognize the government of Russia nor tolerate the propaganda which emanates therefrom, but we do not forget the traditions of Russian friendship. We may put aside our consideration of all international politics and fundamental differences in government. The big thing is the call of the suffering and the dying. (34)

In all, over $60,000,000 was expended in aid to the famine areas. Apart from the Congressional appropriation of $20,000,000, the United States also contributed a considerable quantity of surplus foodstuffs and medical supplies held by the War Department. In response to a request by Hoover, the Chairman of the House Committee on Military Affairs introduced a joint resolution to authorize the Secretary of War to donate supplies from the surplus war stocks of the United States Army. The supplies were not to exceed $4,000,000 in cost value and they were to be turned over to the ARA in Russia. (35)

(34) Ibid., 39.

(35) Ibid., 1271. The supplies were used by the ARA for relief purposes in Russia.
Among the supplies of the war department declared surplus, those which were likely to be of use in Russia amounted roughly to $1,500,000 in medicines, $1,600,000 in dressings, $500,000 in hospital supplies, and an almost unlimited amount of surgical instruments. (36) Through the appropriation of these surplus war stocks and the support of the Red Cross, the ARA carried on a campaign against the spread of typhus, typhoid, malaria and smallpox. In this way, the spread of these diseases which were a natural accompaniment of famine, was much curtailed.

The actual work of feeding the famine victims had progressed well under way by the end of 1921 and continued without interruption throughout 1922. By the beginning of 1923, the famine was well under control. The report of the ARA in January 1923 declared that the famine had been "strongly

(36) Apart from the sum contributed by the U.S. Government, $26,000,000 was raised through the various social, philanthropic, religious and service organizations in the United States, and $12,000,000 was contributed by the Soviet Government, of which $10,000,000 was paid in gold. The Treasury Department had prohibited the United States Mint and Assay Offices from accepting any gold from Soviet Russia until it had been proved that it was not of Bolshevik origin and had never been in the possession of the Bolshevik government of Russia. An exception was, however, made in the case of $10,000,000 paid by the Soviet Government in gold because it was being expended for humanitarian purposes on behalf of the whole Russian people. But it was made clear that the acceptance of this gold did not establish "a precedent for the acceptance of other lots of Russian gold" that might be brought to the United States under different circumstances. Cf. For. Rel. (n.6) 825.
checked" and 10,000,000 people were fed and clothed through the ARA. (37) Some friction had developed between the ARA workers and the Soviet authorities leading to charges on both sides of breaking the Riga agreement; (38) but, on the whole, there was little cause for complaint.

Withdrawal of the ARA

The withdrawal of the ARA at the end of July 1923 was not due to the failure of the Soviet Government to co-operate but to the fact that the crisis had been met and had passed. There were indications that the harvest for the forthcoming year (1924) would afford a substantial surplus of food over all the internal needs of the country, thereby enabling the Government to have an export balance. (39) The Soviet Government itself had done all in its power to cope with the catastrophe, from making special efforts to collect the food tax in the unaffected regions to confiscating the treasures of the church. (40) The International Committee of the Russian Relief Funds, headed by Dr. Nansen, had up to September 1922,

(37) 17 Current History (October, 1922 - March 1923) 383.
(38) 18 Ibid (April - September, 1923) 173.
(39) Ibid., 710.
(40) League of Nations (n. 4) 40-43.
distributed 90,700 tons of foodstuffs and fed 734,000 children and 902,800 adults. (41)

The Chief credit for meeting the disaster, however, must rest with the ARA. It had furnished over 90 per cent of all relief going into Russia. It had collected from all sources over $66,300,000. It had shipped 700,000 metric tons of food and its staff of 200 Americans and 80,000 Russians had saved from death by starvation over ten million people. It had expended $1,455,861 in clothing relief, and over seven and half million people had been vaccinated or inoculated against epidemics. (42) Colonel Haskell later reported,

Through this service America has not only saved millions of lives, but has given impulse to the spiritual and economic recovery of a great nation, and on our own behalf we have created in the assurance of goodwill from the Slav races a great inheritance for our children. (43)

In a resolution, the Soviet of People's Commissars expressed their gratitude by declaring that "the people inhabiting the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics will never forget the help given to them by the American people, through the ARA, seeing in it a pledge of the future friendship of the two nations". In a special message to the Chicago Tribune, George Chicherin, Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Soviet

(41) Ibid., 103-106.
(42) ARA Annual Report (1923) 12.
Government also addressed the following message to the American people.

The Russian people have very great appreciation for the great movement of human feeling on the part of the American people with reference to the suffering women and children in Russia. The gratitude which our people feel for this friendly and heart-felt attitude toward the famine victims will be a lasting tie and link between the peoples of Russia and America. (44)

Political Consequences

The immediate political consequences of the vast relief enterprise, however, were almost wholly negligible. Though directed by the Secretary of Commerce and in large part financed by Congressional appropriations, the entire project remained unofficial.

Incidental contacts were, however, established between the Soviet authorities and the American State Department. In accordance with Article 27 of the Riga agreement, providing for release of all Americans detained in Russia, a Liaison Division of the ARA was established. It acted as the agent of the State Department in dealing with the Soviet Commissariat of Foreign Affairs as to the cases of American citizens seeking reparation.

These contacts, despite the hope of the Soviet Government, did not lead to further negotiations or to any modification of the American policy. Colonel Haskell, on his

(44) 113 Commercial and Financial Chronicle (n.3) 885.
return to the United States, emphasized the stability of the Soviet Government and its eagerness to secure American recognition and American capital. But the Hughes-Hoover policy made it clear that all such hopes were futile. The United States had no doubt shown its friendship towards the Russian nation by coming to the help of the famine-stricken people, but for the Soviet Government, the United States had only the cold shoulder and the icy stare.