The Economic Impact of the Russian Famine of 1891–92

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In the summer and autumn of 1891, a major crop-failure occurred in tsarist Russia, a crop-failure so severe that it engendered what is known historically as ‘the Russian Famine of 1891–92’. Without question a tragedy of considerable proportions had befallen Russia. The crop-failure or famine area included approximately seventeen provinces of the central Black Earth region of Russia — an area to the south and east of Moscow with the Volga river at its centre.¹ The American Ambassador to Russia during the famine, Charles Emory Smith, reported that the famine area extended over a region 400 to 500 miles north and south and even further from east to west — an area double the size of France or equal to the entire American mid-west, from Ohio to North Dakota.² Approximately 13,000,000 of the 35,000,000 inhabitants of the famine district suffered from the crop-failure to the extent that they received government aid.³ Indeed, in order to meet the exigencies of the stricken region, the government was forced to take the drastic measure of prohibiting the exportation of cereals as well as dispensing considerable aid to the suffering people.

Given such a situation, it is relatively easy to understand why modern historians considered the Russian famine of 1891–92 to be a major tragedy, if not one of the most important events in Russian history from 1861 to 1905.⁴ One finds that modern scholars use such

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⁴ Robbins, op. cit., p. ix.
adjectives as great, disastrous, devastating, and catastrophic to describe the tragedy of 1891. In a like manner, many contemporaries, especially within the left-wing intelligentsia, considered the famine to be a ‘terrible calamity’. Plekhanov stated that ‘everyone is agreed that the tragedy, which has overtaken our country this year, is huge and unparalleled in the annals.’ Even that so-called exploiter of the peasantry, Count Sergey Witte, referred to the crop-failure in 1891–92 as that ‘terrible famine’. Despite the fact that there is universal agreement that the famine was a disaster for Russia, no modern Russian historian has attempted to assess the actual economic repercussions of the famine. The purpose of this paper is to make such an assessment.

Modern scholars and many contemporaries hold the opinion that the famine of 1891–92 had a significant impact upon the economic life of tsarist Russia. At the time of the famine, some argued that the economic impact of the famine would result in the virtual ruin of Russia. One article in the Russkoye bogatstvo of November 1891 stated that the famine of 1891 did not just affect the starving ones. On the contrary, ‘it is a tragedy for future generations’. The idea that it would take years to recover from the losses incurred during the famine was apparently quite prevalent. Stepnyak, in exile, editor of the émigré paper Free Russia, and writing after the famine had abated, agreed that the effects of the famine would be felt for many years to come.

Other members of the radical intelligentsia were essentially in accord with Stepnyak. Nikolay-on stated that the famine cost the country a great deal in money, ruined thousands of peasants, and in general lowered the viability of the population. Three years after the famine, in 1895, Nikolay-on still held this opinion. He felt that ‘the famine [of 1891] stretched to extreme tension all our economic connections and relationships. In economic terms the entire country


6 Free Russia, II, 1, New York, August 1891, p. 3.
7 Georgiy V. Plekhanov, ‘Vserossiyskoye razoreniye’ (Sotsial demokrat, iv, Geneva, 1892, p. 65).
9 ‘Bor’ba s golodom’ (Russkoye bogatstvo, xi, St Petersburg, November 1891, p. 226).
10 ‘Iz obschestvennykh kronik’ (Vestnik Eevropy, vi, St Petersburg, November 1892, p. 418).
11 Free Russia, II, 12, July 1892, p. 3; Ibid., III, 4, November 1892, p. 7.
12 Nikolay-on, Ocherki nashego poreformennogo khozyaystva, St Petersburg, 1893, p. xv.
The Russian famine of 1891–92

was rendered isolated to a significant degree. In any case the economic connections were broken, and the whole of our economic edifice was shaken to its very foundation.13

Another Populist, N. A. Karyshev, writing in 1893, agreed with Nikolay-on that the tragedy of 1891 would have a negative impact on the economic relations of Russia for many years. He argued that the birth-rate had dropped and the death-rate had increased, thus causing a decline in the population; the state budget as well as manufacturing and trade were totally disrupted; there was unemployment, bankruptcy, a fall in the rate of exchange and a trade crisis. Finally, the famine had a very detrimental effect on agriculture, in particular causing the peasant to become heavily indebted.14

The Russian Marxists concurred with the Populists concerning the economic effect of the famine. Plekhanov stated that 'the present famine, once and for all ruined the peasant masses, terribly reducing the productivity of Russian agriculture'.15 As a result, the people had become so poor, that the government could no longer rob them, but would have to rob the bourgeoisie.16 Plekhanov also believed that the famine would hasten the break-up of the rural economy and the acquisition of the land by the middle class.17 In effect, he was saying that the famine would create a rural proletariat. This idea found favour with other observers of the famine of 1891–92, in particular Peter Struve and V. G. Korolenko.18

In addition to the modern scholars who view the famine as being devastating or catastrophic, and by implication having serious ramifications for the economic situation in Russia, Theodore von Laue would have us believe that 'the very fabric of the Russian economy went to pieces in the great famine of 1891.'19 Harcave provides the following image of the significance and economic impact of the famine:

So close to the margin of existence were the peasant inhabitants that a meagre harvest was almost certain to bring famine, for they never had any reserve of supplies. A drought in 1891 and an epidemic that followed it were now taking the customary toll. Peasants were dying by the thousands, starved or overcome by cholera, and neither Russian efforts

13 Nikolay-on, 'Apologiya vlasti deneg, kak priznak vremen' (Russkoye bogatstvo, i, January 1895, p. 155).
15 Georgiy Plekhanov, O zadachakh sotsialistov v bor'be s golodom v Rossii, Geneva, 1892, p. 28.
16 Ibid., pp. 29, 33.
17 Ibid., p. 25.
nor those of foreign sympathizers, who sent ton after ton of provisions, could do much to stay the ravages. By the next planting time, there would be an appalling lack of able farm workers, animals, and seed; for the effects of famine always carried over into the second season.

It would thus seem that many students of the famine, both contemporary and modern, held the view that the famine of 1891–92 had, and would continue to have, a dire economic impact on the tsarist system. Indeed, such a conclusion makes considerable sense. Obviously, a crop-failure that could lead to famine would have some impact on the economy, especially in terms of the harvest, exports, balance of trade and the Imperial budget. The subsequent discussion of these categories, in the context of the economic impact of the famine, would appear at first glance to substantiate this generally held hypothesis.

The first index to be considered in evaluating the economic impact of the famine is the harvest of cereals in Russia and the extent of the crop-failure of 1891. A great deal was made of the fact that the harvest of all cereals for the fifty provinces of European Russia was the poorest harvest in some ten years. Comparing the harvest of 1891 with the average harvest for the five year period 1883–87, one finds that the harvest of 1891 was 26 per cent less than the norm. The harvest of cereals in 1891 was also well below the average of all harvests from 1884 to 1894 in the following proportions: rye 70.4 per cent, wheat 67.1 per cent, oats 75.3 per cent, and all other cereals 73.6 per cent. The deficiency in the harvest of rye was particularly significant because it was the main cereal food of the peasantry.

The seriousness of the failure of the cereal harvest becomes more evident by comparing the harvest in the famine stricken provinces with the average harvest in the same districts for the years 1883–1887. For example, the harvest of rye was 45.6 per cent lower than normal, of wheat 55.3 per cent, and of oats 44.2 per cent. Without question there occurred a serious crop-failure in the year 1891.

A further consequence of the famine was a sharp drop in the export of cereals from Russia. It should be noted that the fall in exports did not take place in 1891, but in 1892. This can be explained by the fact that exports for any given year — basically exported in the first six months of a year — are largely drawn from the harvest of

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20 Harcave, op. cit., p. 275.
21 Yermolov, op. cit., p. 17.
22 Ibid., pp. 15, 16.
24 Yermolov, op. cit., p. 19.
the preceding year. Thus, the export of cereals for 1891 was almost as great as that of the previous year. The following table shows the exportation of cereals from Russia in the period 1890–94.26

Table 1  Exportation of all Cereals 1890–94

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Exports (Poods)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1890</td>
<td>418,503,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1891</td>
<td>391,411,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1892</td>
<td>196,422,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>1893</td>
<td>404,039,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>1894</td>
<td>639,511,000</td>
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Since cereals comprised the largest single item of Russian exports, a sharp drop in the export of cereals would have a significant impact on the economy because it would affect Russia’s balance of trade. In 1886–90, cereals constituted 51.2 per cent of the total value of exports from Russia. In 1892, cereals comprised 34.5 per cent, a definite drop but still quite large in view of the events of the preceding year.27 This reduction in cereal exports brought about the lowest surplus in the balance of trade — 76,036,000 roubles — since 1886, and a drop of 259,000,000 r. from the previous year.28 These figures make it clear that Russia’s favourable balance of trade was adversely affected by the famine.

Similarly, the precipitous crop-failure of 1891 had a detrimental impact on the tsarist budget because it reduced the state’s income in several ways, i.e., in terms of (1) tax receipts from the stricken areas, (2) redemption payments, and (3) lower receipts derived from excise taxes and duties placed on exports, imports and the domestic trade, all of which were somewhat curtailed.29 A much greater disruption of the budget stemmed from the huge sums expended in famine

25 Ministerstvo Finansov, The Industries of Russia, vol. iii, St Petersburg, 1893, pp. 103–04.
relief. The data in Table 2 reveal the drastic difference in the budget of 1891 as opposed to that of 1890 and 1892.30

| Table 2 | Imperial Budgets for 1890, 1891, and 1892 (Roubles) |
|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Revenue         | 1890            | 1891            | 1892            |
| Ordinary        | 943,686,000     | 891,594,000     | 970,165,000     |
| Extraordinary   | 103,687,000     | 32,201,000      | 198,679,000     |
| Total           | 1,047,373,000   | 924,795,000     | 1,168,844,000   |
| Expenditure     | 1890            | 1891            | 1892            |
| Ordinary        | 877,780,000     | 875,349,000     | 910,684,000     |
| Extraordinary   | 178,732,000     | 240,298,000     | 214,772,000     |
| Total           | 1,056,512,000   | 1,115,647,000   | 1,125,365,000   |
| Balance         | -9,139,000      | -186,852,000    | +43,488,000     |

The expenditure upon famine relief basically accounts for the differences in the Imperial budgets. The tsarist government expended approximately 196,000,000 r. in 1891 and 1892 in alleviating the famine-stricken districts, the vast majority of which was spent in 1891.31 This is an impressive sum when one realizes that it constituted approximately twenty per cent of the entire budgetary expenditure of 1891 and ten per cent of the total extraordinary expenditure for 1889–98.32 There can be little doubt that the famine of 1891–92 had a significant impact on the budget.

The most serious effect of the famine, which gives particular support to the view that the famine would have a long-term impact, was the widespread destruction of livestock within the famine area. For example, in April 1892 it was reported that in Saratov only one-third of the horses remained alive and one-eighth of the cattle; in Voronezh, 100,000 out of 400,000 horses perished by January 1892; in Samara, 800,000 horses and cattle out of 1,600,000 were killed or starved to death, and only a few of the 2,250,000 sheep remained alive; Tambov lost over half its livestock.33 By mid-winter horses

31 Kovalevsky, op. cit., p. 786. See also Statesman’s Yearbook, ed. J. Scott Keltie, London, 1894, p. 873, which states that the tsarist government spent 192,000,000 r. for famine relief in 1891 and 87,474, 219 r. in 1892. Robbins, op. cit., p. 151, argues that 150,000,000 r. were spent on famine relief.
32 The total extraordinary expenses from 1889–1898 were 1,930,152,000 r. See Kovalevsky, op. cit., p. 786.
33 Smith, op. cit., p. 547; see also P. L. Korf, ‘Povezdka v neurozhaynye mestnosti Kursk Gubernii’ (Trudy Imperatorskago Vol’nago ekonomicheskago obschestva, no. 4, St Petersburg, July–August 1892, p. 114); A. A. Kornilov, Sem’ mesyatsev sredi golodayushchikh krest’yan, Moscow, 1893, pp. 74–83; Free Russia, vol. iii, no. 4, November 1892, p. 7.
and cattle within the famine district were selling for very low prices, i.e., 3–4 roubles for a horse which would have sold for seven to eight times as much in normal times.\(^{34}\) The obvious reason for this drop in the price of livestock is that there was no food for the animals and they either starved or were slaughtered for food. The price of hay had risen from a normal price of 4–5 roubles per ton to over 12 roubles, in the less stricken areas, and up to 30 roubles per ton in the more remote localities.\(^{35}\)

The magnitude of this loss in livestock can be seen from the following data showing the difference in the number of livestock in the fifty European provinces in 1890 and in 1892: (1) 3,100,000 fewer horses, (2) 1,600,000 fewer cattle, (3) 6,000,000 fewer sheep, and (4) 700,000 fewer pigs. This is approximately a ten per cent reduction in each of these categories and a drop of fifteen per cent in the number of horses.\(^{36}\) The significance of the loss of livestock — especially horses — can scarcely be over-emphasized in an agricultural economy where livestock provided power, food and fertilizer. In this one area the famine of 1891–92 was truly significant.

It would appear, then, that the famine of 1891–92 was indeed one of the most important events in Russian history in the second half of the nineteenth century. Approximately 13,000,000 peasants — over ten per cent of the population of the Russian Empire — were receiving some type of governmental aid. Russian livestock declined literally by millions. In addition, the effects of the famine on the harvest, exports and the budget were considerable, and ultimately led to the dismissal of Vyshnegradsky and the appointment of Witte as Minister of Finance. These constitute the obvious signs of the economic impact of the famine. A more penetrating analysis of the economic impact will show, however, that the tsarist state was more viable than many have supposed and that the system emerged from the famine relatively unscathed economically.\(^{37}\)

The famine certainly had a detrimental effect on the export of cereals and thus on the overall balance of trade. But it should also be pointed out that Russia in 1892 still had a favourable balance of trade and the crop failure really did not disrupt the basic flow of gold into Russia. In fact, 1892 marked the third highest amount of gold

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\(^{36}\) Khromov, op. cit., pp. 466–67. One should note that this decline in the total number of livestock in 1891–92 stands in sharp contrast to the gradual yearly increase which is observable throughout this period.

\(^{37}\) Free Russia, ii, 12, July 1892, p. 3. Even Stepnyak was forced to acknowledge this fact in terms of the immediate impact.
and silver imports in the period 1887–1900, approximately 160,000,000 r.\textsuperscript{38} The strength of the Russian balance of trade and the tsarist economy in general is revealed by the increase in gold deposits in the State Bank of St. Petersburg, which on 16 December 1891 stood at 404,700,000 r. and on 16 December 1892 at 528,000,000 r.\textsuperscript{39} Furthermore, with the exception of grain exports, there was very little difference in the value of exports and imports for Russia in 1891–92, indicating that the trade in commodities other than cereals was not affected by the famine. Finally, the failure of the harvest had virtually no impact on other categories of trade, especially the consumer goods trade within Russia.\textsuperscript{40}

The reason that the famine did not have an extensive impact on the trade of Russia was because the Russian economy in the early 1890s was still very backward and non-integrated, or if one prefers, non-monetized.\textsuperscript{41} It was not a highly specialized and differentiated economy, as existed in the capitalist west, and abundance in one region or sector was perfectly consistent with the existence of dearth elsewhere. This basic non-integrated nature of the Russian economy must be borne in mind in attempting to determine the true economic impact of the famine. This does not mean that capitalism was not developing in Russia, that economic phenomena such as specialization in production and market awareness were unknown. It was, after all, that symbol of modern capitalist society — the railway — which made it possible to bring food to the famine districts to prevent total disaster.

An excellent example of the relatively backward, non-integrated nature of the Russian economy can be found in the impact of the high price of rye, the staple food of Russia, in 1891–92. The famine area was the main producer of rye and sold approximately fifty per cent of its total harvest on the domestic market.\textsuperscript{42} The price of rye in 1892 reached 150 kopecks per pood, or three times the price of 1890.\textsuperscript{43} Due


\textsuperscript{40} Isaac A. Hourwich, 'Russia in the International Market' (\textit{Journal of Political Economy}, ii, Chicago, December 1893–September 1894, p. 289).

\textsuperscript{41} Many Populists failed to understand that capitalism had really not yet come to Russia. For example, Nikolay-on recognized that the capitalist system is very complex and integrated. He misread, however, the impact of the famine and argued that the capitalist system was already upon Russia, when in fact closer study shows that Russia had much further to go. See Nikolay-on, \textit{Ocherki} . . ., p. xii.


\textsuperscript{43} Ministerstvo Finansov, \textit{The Industries of Russia}, iii, 1893, p. 125.
to the inelasticity of demand for a subsistence item, such a rise in the price of rye might have had a major impact upon the demand for goods in other sectors of the economy. In 1891–92, this was not the case. For example, the products of heavy industry were not affected by changes in popular consumption, but were largely predicated on state consumption which, as we know, increased rather than declined. But even in the consumer goods industries, the purchase of items such as sugar, kerosene, matches, tobacco, etc. only slightly declined in 1891, and even rose in 1892. The only major popular item to show a distinct drop was the consumption of alcohol, but this might have been caused by the shortage of grain for making spirits, and also by the sharp increase in the excise tax placed on alcohol in 1892.

Those areas that had good harvests in 1891 and 1892, in particular the rye-producing provinces around Moscow and the provinces to the west and north of Moscow, prospered by the misfortune of the eastern Black Earth and Volga agricultural districts. The average and above average harvests within these areas coupled with the high price of cereals certainly boosted the income of some of the farmers outside the famine districts. Thus while a dearth in a large and important region and subsequent increase in the price of a staple product would lower consumer demand for other goods, the profits from higher grain prices in other areas certainly increased consumer demand, and thereby maintained some sort of constancy in consumer demand for 1891 and 1892. It also helps to explain why receipts from taxes on consumer goods declined less than one per cent in 1891 and even rose by seventeen per cent in 1892. Thus one may conclude that in terms of the consumption of consumer goods, the famine of 1891–92 had very little short-term effect.

Possibly a more important measure of the economic significance of the famine, especially from the point of view of a government policy making, would be an evaluation of its effect upon the financial structure of the nation. For example, there seems to be a direct relationship between the famine, the grain trade and changes in the discount rate of the state bank. On 11 February 1891, the discount rate stood at 4½%. On 8 October, after the first ukaz appeared restricting the export of rye, it rose to 5%. On 19 October, three days after the appearance of the second decree restricting food exports,

44 This assumption is based upon an examination of indirect tax receipts derived from the purchase of consumer goods: see Khromov, op. cit., p. 498. See also Hourwich, op. cit., pp. 289–90, which shows that the imports of these items generally increased in 1892 over 1891.


the rate rose to 6%. By January 1892, the discount rate dropped slightly, to 5½%. In the late spring of 1892, when the restrictions on the export of cereals were about to be lifted, the rate fell to 4½%.

The rise in the discount rate of the state bank by 1½% indicates that the famine did affect the financial system of the state. In fact, the discount rate did not rise above 6% again until the financial crisis of 1899, when for twenty days it stood at 7%. It is important to note that, although the discount rate had risen during the winter of 1891–92, with the advent of spring and a new harvest, the rate was down to what it had been before the crop-failure of the previous spring. Thus the famine had only a slight, short-term impact on the fluctuations of the discount rate of the state bank. The rise in the discount rate was designed to add stability to the financial structure, and in particular, to uphold the exchange rate of the rouble which had fallen by twenty per cent during that one year of dearth. One might infer that these conservative measures on the part of the government were not only a reaction to the consequences of the famine, but also a reaction to the international image of Russian finance. The ministry of finance was greatly concerned about this image and made numerous statements to maintain a favourable impression of Russian finance abroad, and it should be acknowledged that Vyshnegradsky was very successful in accomplishing that goal.

Another index of the financial impact of the famine is the volume of savings in the savings banks throughout Russia. From 1870, the number of savings bank depositors and the size of savings deposits steadily rose. The years 1891 and 1892 constitute no exception as the following figures show: in 1890 the number of savings accounts stood at 798,000 and deposits at 139,000,000 r.; in 1891 the number of accounts was 999,000 and deposits totalled 191,000,000 r.; and in 1892 the number of accounts reached 1,194,000 and deposits increased to 239,000,000 r. Thus it would seem that the famine had little or no effect on the flow of savings into banks, and was therefore not totally disruptive even in 1891–92. When one considers that the inhabitants of rural Russia probably constituted a large percentage of the depositors, this raises doubts concerning the general impact of the famine. In 1913 over thirty per cent of the depositors belonged to

48 Ibid., p. 543.
49 Ibid.
51 For example, see a number of articles in The Economist (London) in 1891 and 1892, which reflect the Russian government’s concern for its financial image abroad. See also Crisp, op. cit., pp. 163–64.
52 Khromov, op. cit., p. 540. Over a broad range of years the famine did not cause any deviation from the statistical trend.
the rural sector, and it is more than likely that this sector provided a fairly large percentage already in 1891–92.\footnote{Liashchenko, op. cit., p. 699. See also Crisp, op. cit., p. 165, and Donald M. Wallace, Russia, New York, 1912, p. 539, who view the increase in small savings accounts as an indication that conditions within the rural sector were not as bad as often alleged.}

From the evidence presented above, it is possible to formulate a number of conclusions. On the one hand, the famine of 1891–92 was one of the most dramatic domestic events to befall Russia in the second half of the nineteenth century. The total area devastated by crop-failure, the great number of people that received aid, the number who died — there was approximately a one per cent increase in the death-rate in the famine district in 1892\footnote{Wheat and barley were the chief export cereals from Russia. In the 1890s Russia exported two to five times as much wheat as rye. See Ministerstvo Finansov, Russia: Its Industries and Trade, 1901, p. 171; Ministerstvo Finansov, The Industries of Russia, iii, 1893, pp. 103–95; Kovalevsky, op. cit., pp. 727, 743; Liashchenko, op. cit., pp. 519–20; and George Pavlovsky, Agricultural Russia on the Eve of the Revolution, London, 1930, p. 253.} — the thousands stricken by hunger typhus, and the destruction of livestock, all indicate that the famine was a tragic incident. Nevertheless, it would seem that in terms of the entire nation the overall economic consequences were slight and essentially of short duration.

The evidence shows that export trade, apart from the grain trade, was not disrupted, that consumer demand remained high and thus that domestic trade was not seriously damaged. In addition, the financial structure \textit{vis-à-vis} the discount rate and savings deposits was not seriously affected. Finally, it has been shown that Russia still had a favourable balance of trade for 1891 and 1892 and that gold was still flowing into the country.

Had the crop-failure and subsequent dearth taken place within the primarily wheat and barley-growing areas — wheat being the real export crop — rather than the rye-growing districts, the economic results might have been more significant.\footnote{The Economist, i, London, 9 April 1892, p. 478.} As it was, the government and a portion of the peasantry of the famine area absorbed the losses resulting from the crop-failure. The government itself was able to counter the shock of the famine by floating loans abroad,\footnote{Robbins, p. 171.} supported by the rise in the discount rate, and in turn provided a bare subsistence of food and even loans to the peasants stricken by famine. Therefore, as long as there remained enough food within Russia to feed the people, and more importantly, as long as the government could absorb the losses from a crop-failure financially through its own monetary reserves, a famine such as that of 1891–92 would not have an appreciable economic effect on Russian society.
The following quotation from John Stuart Mill's *Principles of Political Economy* illustrates the point that disasters such as the crop-failure of 1891 do not necessarily have a long-term impact:

This perpetual consumption and reproduction of capital affords the explanation of what has so often excited wonder, the great rapidity with which countries recover from a state of devastation; the disappearance, in a short time, of all traces of the mischiefs done by earthquakes, floods, hurricanes, and the ravages of war. An enemy lays waste a country by fire and sword, and destroys or carries away nearly all the moveable wealth existing in it: all the inhabitants are ruined, and yet, in a few years after, everything is much as it was before. . . . There is nothing at all wonderful in the matter. What the enemy have destroyed, would have been destroyed in a little time by the inhabitants themselves: . . . The possibility of a rapid repair of their disasters mainly depends on whether the country has been depopulated. If its effective population have not been extirpated at the time, and are not starved afterwards; then, with the same skill and knowledge which they had before, with their land and its permanent improvements undestroyed, and the more durable buildings probably unimpaired, or only partially injured, they have nearly all the requisites for their former amount of production. If there is as much of food left to them, or of valuables to buy food, as enables them by any amount of privation to remain alive and in working condition, they will in a short time have raised as great a produce, and acquired collectively as great wealth and as great a capital, as before; by the mere continuance of that ordinary amount of exertion which they are accustomed to employ in their occupations.57

By 1893, the Russian economy was functioning as if the famine had never happened. Nevertheless, the tragedy of 1891 was important because contemporaries thought it was significant and acted upon this misconception. Indeed, the study of the famine reveals the inability of the intelligentsia to overcome its personal bias against the tsarist government and to perceive objectively the causes and economic impact of the famine. Unfortunately, until now modern historians have accepted the interpretation of the intelligentsia and thus have perpetuated this misconception of the past.