

The grain front! Stalin said the struggle for grain was the struggle for socialism. I was convinced that we were warriors on an invisible front, fighting against kulak sabotage for the grain which was needed by the country, by the five-year plan. ...

The highest measure of coercion on the hardcore holdouts was “undisputed confiscation.” A team ... would search the hut, barn, yard, and take away all the stores of seed, lead away the cow, the horse, the pigs.

In some cases they would be merciful and leave some potatoes, peas, corn for feeding the family. But the stricter ones would make a clean sweep...

The women howled hysterically, clinging to the bags.

“Oy, that’s the last thing we have! That was for the children’s kasha [cereal]! Honest to God, the children will starve!” ...

I heard the children echoing them with screams ....

It was excruciating to see and hear all this. And even worse to take part in it. [...] And I persuaded myself, explained to myself. I mustn’t give in to debilitating pity. We were realizing historical necessity. We were performing our revolutionary duty. We were obtaining grain for the socialist fatherland. For the five-year plan. ...

How could all this have happened?

Who was guilty of the famine which destroyed millions of lives?

How could I have participated in it ...

We were raised as the fanatical adepts of a new creed, the only true religion of scientific socialism. The party became our church militant.... The works of Marx, Engels and Lenin were accepted as holy writ, and Stalin was the infallible high priest.... Stalin was the most perspicacious, the most wise (at that time they hadn’t yet started calling him “great” and “brilliant”). He said: “The struggle for grain is the struggle for socialism.” And we believed him unconditionally. And later we believed that unconditional collectivization was unavoidable if we were to overcome the capriciousness and uncertainty of the market and the backwardness of individual farming to guarantee a steady supply of grain, milk and meat to the cities. And also if we were to reeducate millions of peasants, those petty landowners ... to transform them into laborers with a social conscience, to liberate them ... from ignorance and prejudice, and to accustom them to culture, to all the boons of socialism.

-Lev Kopelev, “Education of a True Believer” (1980) excerpt.