

The famine of 1932–1933 as a common tragedy of the nations of the USSR: national and regional aspects

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Abstract

This article examines controversy in Russian and foreign historiography of the famine of 1932–1933 in the USSR, and argues that this famine was a common tragedy of the people of the USSR and not genocide against the Ukrainian people as argued by some researchers in the Ukraine and other countries. The concept of genocide through starvation of the Ukrainian people emerged in the USA, Canada and Poland in the 1930s and was supported by the U.S. President R. Reagan in the early 1980s, becoming one of the symbols of the Cold War. Numerous reliable sources published in Russia in recent years have indicated that the famine of 1932–1933 was the result of the policy of collectivization and grain procurement conducted under Stalin's leadership in the early 1930s in the grain regions of the USSR. These areas became the epicenter of the famine because bread was removed from these areas for the needs of industrialization (grain export, supply, etc.). In these areas, the population suffered equally from hunger regardless of their nationality, as shown by an article on the Ukraine and the Lower Volga. The article emphasizes that the famine in the Ukraine was the result not only of the policy of central government, but also of regional leadership. The main conclusion of the article is that the famine of 1932–1933 had regional peculiarities and was not the result of the national policies of the Stalinist leadership.

Keywords : famine, genocide, Ukraine, USSR, collectivization, nationalism

Whether the famine of 1932–1933 was a result of the national policies of Stalinism is one of the most controversial problems in Russian and western historiography. Some supporters of this view claim that Stalinist policy in Soviet Ukraine was to starve the Ukrainians to death because they were perceived as the most dangerous enemies of Stalin's regime, leading to the Ukrainian holodomor genocide of 1932–1933 (注1). In disputing this view, I discuss national aspects of Stalinist agrarian policy in detail, and argue that the Stalinist government applied a universal policy to all Soviet villages without regard to national background.

For the last 20 years I have studied the USSR famine of 1932–1933 (注2) in detail as part of my work as a research supervisor of an international project of the Federal Archival Agency of Russia “The USSR Famine. 1929–1934.” A documentary series of the same name contains documents on the subject from central and regional archives of Russia, Belorussia, Kazakhstan and others (注3). This archive provides evidence that the famine of 1932–1933 was a tragedy common to all USSR nations. It was not a genocide of any particular Soviet nation (注4). Rather, as it seems likely that there was no national background, it makes more sense to talk about regional or national-and-regional peculiarities, not national characteristics of the hunger.

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Contemporary historians began to study the famine of 1932–1933 as a result of Stalinist national policy in the years directly following the tragedy as can be seen in the “International Reaction to the USSR Famine” (注 5) of the third volume of “The USSR Famine.” According to these documents, it was politicians, not historians, who laid the grounds for the modern concept of there being a national aspect to Stalin’s policy which led to the USSR famine of 1932–1933. These politicians were critics and opponents of Stalinism in the 1930s from abroad. In fact, the idea of the “Ukrainian Holodomor Genocide,” the terms “Holodomor” and “Soviet-Russian Holodomor” and others were created by Ukrainian communities of the USA, Canada and Poland.

A letter of John Theodorovich, the archbishop of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church in Philadelphia, which dates back to September, 1933, is of great importance and is published in the 3rd volume of the “The USSR Famine” series. There’s a very interesting phrase expressing the idea of modern followers of the “Ukrainian Holodomor Genocide” concept: “Moscow communist government wants to get rid of the Ukrainian peasants as determined opponents of the regime at any price. It intends to found a kind of modern Samaria instead of Ukraine under the principle of all nations mixing, the Mongols and the Semites in particular, to destroy the Ukrainian nation’s drive to sovereignty and a national free life” (注 6).

Ironically, another “author” of the idea of the national aspect of the USSR famine of 1932–1933 is Stalin himself, or more accurately, the Stalinist regime. The 3rd volume of the series contains documents concerning the case of the March in 1933 on the so-called “All-Ukrainian Rebel Combat Organization,” whose members worked in the systems of the Narkomzem and Tractorocenter of Ukraine. The people were shot for their attempt “to establish a Ukrainian national bourgeois democratic republic by means of a peasants’ revolt and intervention” (注 7). Analysis of the interrogation protocols reveals that this prosecution was actually falsification of security officials fulfilling an order (注 8). This helped Stalin’s regime to “pass the buck” and find “scapegoats” for the collapse of Ukrainian agriculture of 1932–1933. It was part of Stalin’s struggle against sabotage and “public enemies” in Soviet agriculture. Thoughtful researchers should not take it seriously.

Analysis of the national aspect of the tragedy of 1932–1933 in the USSR reveals an important fact to modern society and those specialists who support the idea of the Ukrainian Holodomor Genocide by the Stalinist regime. Public organizations in western countries campaigning in 1933 against Stalin’s criminal policy toward Soviet villages did not influence economic and diplomatic relations between these countries and the Soviet Union (注 9). Even at the protest company peak against the USSR famine (January–August, 1933) the Soviet Union remained the most important trade partner for Western Europe and the USA emerging from an economic crisis. Western European countries continued to buy Soviet grain and supply industrial machinery to the USSR (注 10), though less than usual. The paradox is that in 1933, at the peak of the tragedy when millions of Soviet people died, the USSR had achieved its greatest success in the sphere of diplomacy and strengthened its international position. On December 28, 1933, in his speech at the 4th

session of the Central Executive Committee of the Soviet Union (CEC of the USSR) known as “On the International Situation of the Soviet Union” Molotov proudly declared: “The greatest success of USSR foreign policy is the resumption of relations with the USA, Herriot’s visit, the conclusion of a treaty of non-aggression, neutrality and friendship with Italy, the resumption of relations with Spain and Uruguay initiated by these countries.” He also mentioned that in 1933 the USSR initiated the conclusion of non-aggression pacts with Poland, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Czechoslovakia, Turkey, and Afghanistan, which condemned the use of military force in the sphere of international relations(注 11).

The responsibility of western countries for the USSR tragedy in 1932–1933 should be examined because business and geopolitical interests seemed to be more important for them than humanitarian problems or human rights.

The ideological work of OUN-UPA during World War II supports the idea that the origins of the Ukrainian Holodomor Genocide concept were purely political. Holodomor was not a significant event either for it or for the Nazis in their attempt “to free” Ukraine from Bolshevism(注 12). The idea became very important only at the beginning of the 1980s when US President Reagan called the USSR “the Evil Empire.” Demchenko, the 1st secretary of the USSR Embassy in the USA, for the USSR Ministry of Foreign Policy wrote a briefing note in December 18, 1985 (now in the 3rd volume of “the USSR Famine” documentary series under the title “On the formation of the USA Congress committee aiming to study the reasons and consequences of the so-called “great Ukrainian famine of 1932–1933”(注 13)) that indicates that the Ukrainian Holodomor genocide idea was the result of escalation of the Cold War. This opinion was imposed by administrative means. President Yushchenko popularized this idea and it was then taken up by international organizations, trying to accuse modern Russia. That is how the USSR famine of 1932–1933 became known as the “Holodomor Genocide.”

Delivering a speech at the 1st Stalinism history conference, O.A. Chubarian, an outstanding Russian expert, pointed out the need to study Stalinism in the context of the epoch, i.e. from a historical perspective, to take into account the international situation(注 14).

This approach to the problem of the USSR famine in 1932–1933 is widely followed by an international group of historians and demographers formed by the Australian scholar, S. Wheatcroft, to work on the project “World Famine of the XX c.” I am also a member of this group(注 15). Based on many documents, he claims that no colonial country demanded any moral or financial benefits from different international organizations as patiently as Ukraine did. Meanwhile, there were many more famine victims in India during the period of British rule than in Ukraine during the Soviet period(注 16).

There was famine in China and Africa. J. De Castro, a UN expert in food supplies questions, wrote the book “Geography of Hunger” about them after World War II(注 17). Why is it that these famines do not attract the attention of the global community, and why is the Ukrainian famine of 1932–1933 considered so important?

What are the arguments against the idea that the USSR famine of 1932–1933 was the result of Stalinist national policy and why is the phrase “common tragedy of the USSR nations” preferred? Furthermore, why should we pay attention to regional peculiarities, not national ones?

So far researchers have found no documents showing the intention of Stalin’s regime to use starvation to reduce the population of particular USSR nations (注 18). Some researchers say that Stalin covered his traces, did not sign official papers, and did not issue such orders directly, but documents in the Russian Federation President Archive refute these claims. Many documents on “the USSR Famine. 1929–1934” have been declassified and will be published uncut with the support of the Russian Humanitarian Science Foundation.

Stalin never attempted to cover his traces. He was a plain dealer. This has been pointed out by Moshe Lewin, one of the most competent experts on the problem (注 19). I have not found any documents of Stalin’s government containing strong language about the Ukrainians, Kazakhs or Russian as national groups that should be punished by means of hunger or anything else. This viewpoint appeared during the war years.

The most interesting point is that there are no documents supporting the statement about the national aspect in performing agricultural policy related to the 1st five-year plan period. There are real state orders, not declarations. The situation is quite the opposite: everybody was brought to a common average standard. All resolutions about collectivization and grain requisition of the central secret instructions level were very similar (注 20). Economic specialization of each region was more important for Stalin’s government. He did not think about nationalities. The Russians, Ukrainians or Jews were all the same to him. The situation in the Central Chernozem region supports this statement. In 1933, the grain districts, where the Ukrainians traditionally lived, suffered greatly from the famine (注 21).

Some scholars say that the rural population of Kuban is Ukrainian because Kuban is the genocide territory and the rural population speaks Ukrainian. What do they call themselves now and what then? In fact, they are Cossacks from Ukraine! And the ethnicity of the Cossacks is still controversial.

Some researches take Stalin’s words out of context in an attempt to explain the Ukrainian Holodomor genocide. S.V. Kulchitsky, the leading Ukrainian expert in the subject of the famine 1932–1933, and his colleagues look upon I.V. Stalin’s letter to L.M. Kaganovich dated 11 August, 1932 as the main base for their concept of the “Ukrainian Holodomor genocide.” The Soviet leader said: “The most important now is Ukraine... If we don’t start to control the situation in the Ukraine right now, we can lose the Ukraine” (注 22).

Many Ukrainian scholars have omitted the first two items of the letter (注 23). In my opinion, this is no accident. These items are about really important things for Stalin, first of all the “Law of 5 Spikelets” (The Decree “About protection of the property of state enterprises, kolkhozes and cooperatives, and the strengthening of public (socialist) property” dated 7 August, 1932). In the letter, Stalin points out that this law turned out to be “quite good” and up to date. According to the letter, the Soviet leader worried greatly about applying this “law.” The second item of the letter contains information about the usage of grain fodder and locomotives—the questions he is going to discuss with Kaganovich in Moscow. And only then are there Sta-

lin's ideas about the Ukraine. But there is no mention of draconian measures to say nothing about "the Holodomor genocide." Stalin seems much more worried about the situation on the border between the USSR and hostile Poland, as mentioned at the end of the letter ("economic and political strengthening of the Ukraine and primarily its border districts"). Rather, this letter reveals Stalin's intention to strengthen the Ukrainian state machine and the economic system of the republic. If he intended repression, he would not have sent Ukrainian leaders to Moscow to be given high ranks or spoke about the need to give as many resources to the Ukrainian SSR as possible ("spare no expense").

So why were regional or national-and-regional aspects more important than national aspects?

Documents open to researchers clearly show that the Soviet Ukraine was a huge agricultural region with a historical specialization in grain production. The majority of the population of this area was Ukrainian. They were affected by Stalin's policies because they were grain growers, not because they were Ukrainians. The situation was the same in the RSFSR in 1932-1933 when the Russians, Kazakhs, Germans and the Mor-dovians suffered because they were grain growers and breeders. This tragedy was common for a Soviet village, which was sacrificed for the needs of forced industrialization (注 24).

When understanding the famine of 1932-1933, the events in grain country regions and Kazakhstan are important. The Stalinist regime pressed them greatly because of the need for industrialization and because it was necessary to conserve the kolkhoz system, which had been organized there in a great rush and at enormous cost. Researchers have not found any other reasons.

Trying to prove the idea of a national aspect to Stalin's policy, different scholars put forward numbers of the famine victims in Ukraine, Kazakhstan and Russia. The reported number of deaths is huge: from 5 to 19 million people. Many Ukrainians, Russians, Kazakhs and others starved to death during the USSR famine of 1932-1933 but many more Ukrainians and Kazakhs starved than any other peoples.

What are the origins of this large number of reported Ukrainian victims? The 3rd volume of "The USSR Famine" series states the numbers of USSR famine victims, including Ukrainians, taken from the "New York Times" articles dated 15 June and 4 August 1934. They were announced by different western public figures of that time (注 25). Those are "primary sources."

Some specialists claim that the Soviet system of population registry (Central Administration of Economic Accounting (CAEA)-Civil Registry) collapsed, and suggest that this explains the numerous famine victims in Ukrainian SSR in 1933. They also claim that mass population mortality was not registered and that the Stalinist regime hid the real numbers. Based on this thesis, they present the following figures: 7-10 million victims in total, including 3-5 million in Ukrainian SSR.

The documents from the section "Demographical consequences of the Famine" of the 3rd volume of "The USSR Famine" series (arranged by S. Wheatcroft and V.B. Zhiromskaya) discredit the above viewpoint about the collapse of the Soviet system of population registry at the peak of the tragedy (注 26). Rather, document analysis reveals that this system was working during the period of the 1st five-year plan. Available

demographical data with some corrections allow more adequate numbers of the famine victims to be derived, including regional information. They are as follows: 3.5 million for the Ukraine and other Russian regions, and no less than 1 million for Kazakhstan (註 27).

Reliable data of demographical statistics casts doubt on one of the main arguments of the followers of the Ukrainian Holodomor genocide concept and strengthens the idea that the famine had regional peculiarities.

S.V. Kulchitsky always said that the Ukrainian Holodomor had such terrible consequences there because in January 1933, Stalin's envoys and their assistants confiscated all kinds of food, not only grain in the Ukraine (註 28). To support his idea he appeals to witness evidence, not to any central instructions (註 29). In his opinion, people died because they were Ukrainian. According to him, Stalin's government wanted to prevent them from leaving the USSR in 1932 and establishing an independent Ukraine, and decided to punish them and starve them to death by taking all food out of the region.

But if only grain was seized, as S.V. Kulchitsky claims, why did several hundred peasants starve to death in 1933 in the territory of the Lower Volga region? Why were there acts of cannibalism? Why did people bury their neighbors in common graves as famine victims? (註 30)

Using S.V. Kulchitsky's statement, it is difficult to explain the fact that the peak of the population mortality in Ukraine was in April-June of 1933 as well as in other grain regions of the USSR including the Lower Volga.

According to reliable demographical statistics, people in the Ukraine lived without any food for some months from January 1933 (Tables 1, 2).

Table 1 Natural population movement in the Ukrainian SSR by month for 1933

Month	Total amount of the dead			Postneonatal mortality		
	Male	Female	Total of male and female	Male	Female	Total of male and female
	16	17	18	20	21	22
January	35752	25274	61026	3843	2830	6673
February	51673	30211	81884	4261	3131	7392
March	118505	59480	177985	6356	4703	11059
April	155388	78890	234278	5653	4350	10003
May	211133	119535	330668	5722	4240	9962
June	259299	167995	427294	5794	4353	10147
July	187062	122408	309470	6091	4638	10729
August	56595	58458	115053	5041	3999	9040
September	36706	26074	62780	3355	2565	5920
October	21124	18299	39423	2682	2023	4705
November	17731	15412	33143	1973	1526	3499
December	18982	16921	35903	1930	1363	3293
Year	1169950	738957	1908907	52701	39721	92422

RGAE (Russian State Archive of the Economy). Fund 1562. Series 329. File 17. Pages 241–241(overleaf).

Table 2 Decrease of mortality among rural populations of the Lower Volga Region and the Ukrainian SSR in 1932 and 1933 in percentage terms (based on Civil Registry Office materials).

Lower Volga Region				Ukrainian SSR			
	1932	1933	1933 to 1932(%)		1932	1933	1933 to 1932(%)
	Registered mortality				Registered mortality		
January	3408	5390	158	January	31691	43901	138
February	3416	6892	202	February	35404	60632	171
March	3616	12750	352	March	43100	135767	315
April	3483	18955	544	April	46617	174202	373
May	3502	30170	861	May	50401	253155	502
June	4070	31635	777	June	55293	361195	653
July	5289	28753	544	July	52818	278789	528
August	4768	15555	326	August	47939	103319	215
September	4766	9059	190	September	43265	65649	152
October	4201	6832	163	October	47083	42820	91
November	3659	4738	129	November	38716	28167	73
December	3771	4875	129	December	34801	34421	99
One year average	47949	175604	366	One year average	527134	1582017	300

Source: Russian State Archive of the Economy (RGAE). Fund 1562. Series 329. File 17. Pages 19, 56, 136; Станіслав Кульчицький. Демографічні наслідки голодомору 1933 р. в Україні. Геннадій Ефіменко. Всесоюзний перепис 1937 р. в Україні: документи та матеріали. Київ, 2003. С. 46.

According to S.V. Kulchitsky's logic, the most sorrowful period for the Ukraine was February-March of 1933! But in fact it was later. How can this be?

Speaking about 300 thousand famine victims in the Volga region, opponents usually say that there was no famine in Russia at all, or it was much less severe in comparison with that in the Ukraine or Kazakhstan (注 31). S.V. Kulchitsky, for example, argues that there were two different famines in the USSR in 1932–1933: one is the Ukrainian Holodomor, the other is a famine outside the region of Ukraine (with a proviso for Kazakhstan).

From this viewpoint, it is difficult to explain the same excess mortality level in the grain regions of the USSR in 1933 taking into account the rate of its increase. Reliable and easy to check data on the subject are given below (Tables 3–6).

What do these numbers tell us? The famine in the Ukraine and in the grain Volga regions was of the same severity. The difference is in the numbers of rural population who lived in each region.

The most difficult and less studied problem is the Kazakhstan famine (注 32). The people who starved there in 1932–1933 were not only the Kazakhs (注 33). For example, plenipotentiary in Kazakhstan to F.I. Goloschekin, the secretary of a Kazakh district committee the All-Union Communist Party of Bolsheviks, in his message about the Pavlodar famine to the Unified State Political Department (OGPU), dated 11 January 1932, states: “By accounts of the Semipalatinsk special sector, 14 members of kolkhoz died from hunger

Table 3 Rural population of the Lower Volga (LVR) and Middle Volga regions (MVR) according to the CAEA of the USSR on 1 January, 1933 and 1 January, 1935. The percentage of the population decline in the same period.

	According to CAEA			Acc. to agricultural fiscal accounting of 1935	Acc. to the development of national population movement in 1934	Decline of population	% on 1 January, 1933
		On 1 January, 1933	On 1 January, 1935				
LVR	The Kuibyshev region	5327,5	4439,8	4391,2	4542,3	-785,2	15
	The Orenburg region	1359,3	1040,1	1069,1	935,4	-423,9	31,2
MVR	The Saratov region	2281,3	1589,3	1583,3	1556,2	-725,1	32
	The Stalingrad region	1837,2	1506,9	1518,8	1520,7	-316,5	17,2
		10805,3	8576,1	8562,4	8554,6	2250,7	21

Sources: RGAE. Fund 1562. Series 329. File 49. Page 162.

Table 4 Rural population of the Ukrainian SSR according to the CAEA of the USSR on 1 January, 1933 and 1 January, 1935. The percentage of the population decline in the same period.

	According to CAEA on 1 January, 1933	Acc. to the development of national population movement in 1934.	Decline of population on 1 January, 1935.	% on 1 January, 1933
The Vinnytsia region	4407,5	3595,9	811,6	18,4
The Dnepropetrovsk region	2844,7	2375,4	469,3	16,5
The Donetsk region	1876,4	1682,0	194,4	10
The Kiev region	5142,7	3700,6	1442,1	28
The Odessa region	2359,9	1957,1	402,8	17
The Kharkov region	4877,4	3461,0	1416,4	29
The Chernigov region	2682,3	2125,4	556,9	21
The Moldavian ASSR	551,8	450,3	101,5	18
The Ukrainian SSR	24742,7	19347,7	5395,0	22

Sources: RGAE. Fund 1562. Series 329. File 49. Page 161.

in aulsoviet No.11 in the Pavlodar region; 2 members of kolkhoz also died and 6 families are swelling from it in the German kolkhoz “Rota Fane” (注 34).

The same information is contained in another document, known as a memorandum of Alma-Ata city council chair (predgorsovet) about taking to the hospital and burying of the dead found on the city streets by militiamen in the 2nd half of March 1933. The memorandum dates back to 16 March, 1933. It states: “I’m

Table 5 Rural population decline of Lower Volga former districts and Middle Volga regions between the population census of 1926 and 1937 (in comparison with regions of the Ukrainian SSR).

Former districts of the Lower Volga and Middle Volga regions			
	Rural population acc. to the census of 1926	Rural population acc. to the census of 1937	1937 to 1926(%)
The Kuibyshev region	3704388	2950886	79,7
The Moldavian ASSR	1212565	1102955	91,0
The Orenburg region	1280852	1196649	93,4
The Saratov region	2032247	1209330	59,5
The Volga German ASSR	495875	366802	74,0
The Stalingrad region	1685255	1375596	81,6
LVR and MVR in total	10411182	8202218	79,8

Sources: Vsesojuznaya perepis' naselenija SSSR 1937. Kratkie itogi. M., 1991. P. 48-59.

Table 6 Rural population decline in the Ukrainian SSR between population census of 1926 and 1937.

the Ukrainian SSR			
	Rural population acc. to the census of 1926	Rural population acc. to the census of 1937.	1937 to 1926(%)
The Vinnytsia region	3829831	3456669	90,3
The Kiev region	4748237	3786939	79,8
The Chernigov region	2444022	2194462	89,8
The Kharkov region	4747282	3469456	73,1
The Donetsk region	2032386	1392845	68,5
The Dnepropetrovsk region	2916426	2152859	73,8
The Odessa region	2455291	1899485	77,4
The Moldavian ASSR	489638	473127	96,6
The Ukrainian SSR	23663113	18825842	79,6

Sources: Vsesojuznaya perepis' naselenija SSSR 1937. Kratkie itogi. M., 1991. P. 48-59.

writing to let you know that corpses from Alma-Ata city streets were taken to the dead-house every day. On 15 March, 1933 12 corpses were taken (5 Kazakhs and 7 Europeans). On 10 March there were 17 corpses (11 Kazakhs and 6 Europeans)” (注 35).

The Kazakhs literature contains information about 1-2 million people who died from Stalin's hunger (注 36), but why have no Kazakhstan mass graves of the famine victims been found? Where are the traces of the tragedy? In Ukraine memorialization took place. Common graves can be found in practically every village, and memorials and memorial signs have been set up. Interestingly, such evidence is hard to find in Russia. Such memorials are a tribute to the Ukrainian government. There's no other place in the world where recollections about famine victims are of such importance.

Is it possible for so many people to die within a year? Where are their remains? Available sources contain information about the mass mortality of the Kazakhs not on the steppes, but in kolkhoz, populated localities, in the places from where they started out on their way to Russian regions and on the way back home to Kazakhstan (注 37). But the issue is not millions of people.

Kazakhs are normal people. It is difficult to imagine that they rushed into the steppes to commit collective suicide. Instead, at the time of famine they tried to be close to people with a wish for salvation (注 38). That's why the question about the number of famine victims requires further study. S. Wheatcroft examined this issue in Astana as a visiting professor in Nazarbaev University.

When considering the regional peculiarities of the famine, it is necessary to note the specifics of producing and consuming regions and take into account macro and micro levels of the problems (the level of republic, region, village, family). These items were clearly described by Amartya Sen, the Nobel prize winner, concerning the Indian Famine, and by Cormack O'Garda using the example of the Irish Potato Famine (注 39). In the context of the relations between central and local government, republic and regional elites should also be mentioned.

This method reveals why there were so many famine victims in Ukraine in 1933 in the Kiev and Khar'kov regions. For example, the lack of central procurement of the Kiev population led to local authorities confiscating grain from local resources in 1932. This resulted in mass mortality in Ukrainian cities without any industry (注 40).

The reason for the enormous number of Ukrainian victims in 1933 includes not only central policy, but also the behavior of S. Keasior, its arrogant party leader. In 1932 he hid the scale of the republic's agricultural crisis. He did not want to acknowledge the Ukrainian tragedy even at the beginning of 1933 (注 41).

Thus, a regional approach to the problem, based on comprehensive analysis of reliable and various sources, helps to provide a well-balanced and scientifically-grounded estimate of the tragedy of the former USSR nations in 1932–1933.

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